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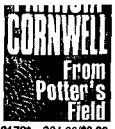

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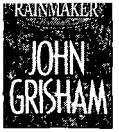

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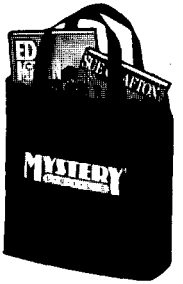

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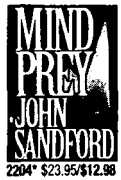

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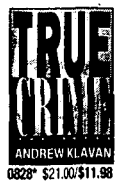

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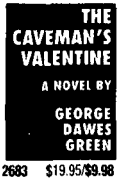

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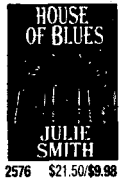

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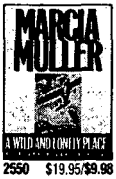

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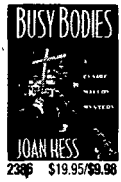

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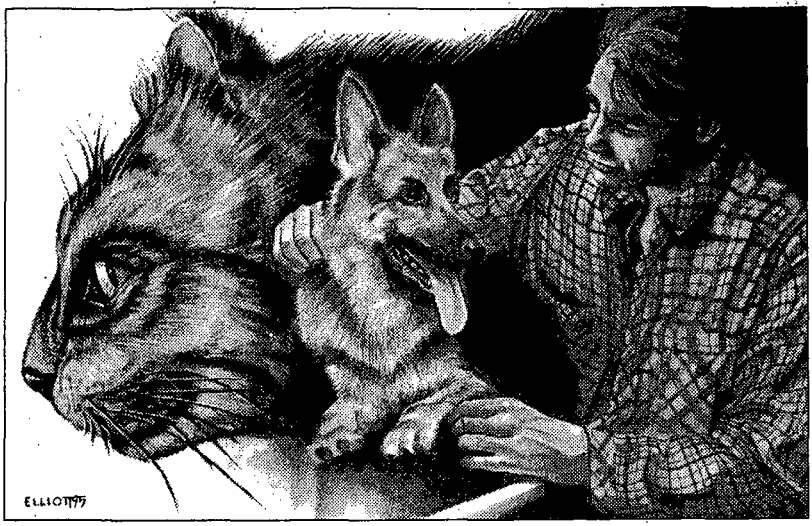

Art by Darryl Elliott

FRANKEN KAT

by Doug Allyn

There wasn't much blood. As David sliced open the hound's hip, a thin red line trickled down the incision into the blood drain of the stainless-steel surgery table, but the gush of crimson that should have pulsed out of an eight-inch wound didn't occur. Edema was already restricting the circulation to the leg.

"Damn," he said softly.

Bettina glanced up at him, her pale blue eyes unreadable above the surgical mask. "It's worse than we thought, isn't it?"

"Welcome to the wide world of surgery," David said, nodding. "On the x-ray, it looked like the femur was in three pieces, a serious break, but repairable. What we've actually got is a shattered bone, twenty little pieces, maybe more."

"Will you have to amputate?"

"Maybe," David said grimly, "but not today. The hip socket seems to be in good shape. I'm going to start removing the chips.

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I want you to scrape them and recover every bit of cancellous bone, the spongy stuff inside of the marrow cavity. I think I can shift the larger bone fragments around and reduce the pieces into a usable femur. Then we'll use cancellous bone to fill the gaps, like putty."

"Will she be crippled?"

"Hard to say. This leg will be shorter than the others, but she's slightly built, only forty-five pounds and a year old, with a lot of growing to do. With luck, she'll make a good recovery and her gait might not be affected all that much. But we've got to—"

The telephone gurgled. Bettina quickly lifted it off its cradle and switched it to speaker.

"Westbrook Veterinary Clinic."

"Bettina? Is David available?"

"I'm busy, Yvonne," David yelled at the phone as he lifted a bone chip out of the incision with his forceps. "What is it?"

"There's a man here, asking about a handyman's job. He said George Coontz sent him."

"I told George you wanted somebody for the summer," David acknowledged, "but I'm in surgery now. You'll have to handle it."

"What am I supposed to do, look him over?"

"You can see well enough to count his arms and legs," David snapped. "If he's got two of each and wants to work, hire him. I really can't talk now."

The bang of the phone being slammed down came clearly over the speaker. "Sorry," Bettina said, "I should have switched the machine on."

"You're fired," David said. "Never darken my clinic doormat again."

The winner of the 1994 Edgar Allan Poe Award for his story "The Dancing Bear" (AHMM, 3/94), Doug Allyn has recently completed a novel-length expansion of his *EQMM* story "Blackwater" (10/94) for St. Martin's Press. The book, also entitled *Blackwater,* is scheduled for publication in April of 1996. St. Martin's published a novel-length expansion of Mr. Allyn's *EQMM* story "Icewater Mansions" in February 1995. †

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"Yeah, right," Bettina said. "Would you like some music while you operate?"

"Better make it Mozart," David sighed. "We're going to have a long afternoon."

It was nearly dusk when David eased his Jeep to a halt in the brick-topped parking area at the rear of the estate. He sat there a moment, drinking in the scent of the ancient lilac trees that shaded the rambling Tudor house, letting the tension of the day roll away. He shook his head to clear it, then climbed out and started toward the back door. A figure stepped out of the shadow of the garage, blocking his path.

"Somethin' I can help you with, buddy?"

"That depends," David said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Greg Malley. I work here."

"Good for you. I'm Dr. Westbrook. I live here."

"You're the doctor?" Malley said doubtfully, eyeing David's battered Jeep, scuffed jeans, and faded flannel shirt.

"I'm afraid so," David said, offering his hand. "Don't look so surprised. Not all vets wear hospital whites or drive Cadillacs."

"Sorry, I guess I thought you'd be a little older," Malley said. His grip was firm, but not pushy. He was half a head taller than David, with broad shoulders and blond, close-cropped hair. He was wearing a fitted chambray shirt and pressed khaki slacks with a knife-edge crease. His face was lean and chiseled, with wide-set gray eyes. Not male-model handsome, but not far from it.

"You're looking for yard work?" David asked curiously. "Keeping the stables clean, feeding the horses, whatever?"

"I'm looking for steady work that keeps me outside. This job suits me fine, if it's okay with you."

"It's my wife's house, it's her decision," David said with a shrug. "As long as the work gets done, we'll get along fine."

"There is one thing, Doc," Malley said. "I've been away from Algoma for a while and I don't have a place to stay. Your missis said it'd be okay if I moved into the servant's quarters over the garage till I can get a place of my own. She said I should check with you first."

"It's fine by me," David said. "The rent'll be a hundred and fifty a week, though."

"A hundred—?"

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"I'm kidding, Greg," David said drily. "I kid a lot. Sorry about that. Crash as long as you like. You'll find blankets in the cedar chest at the foot of the bed. Oh, one friendly word of advice? Don't tell Yvonne you expected me to be Marcus Welby, M.D. She's a few years older than I am and she's a tad touchy about it."

"No problem," Malley said, glancing around, noting the contrast between David's battered Jeep and the immaculate Tudor home and three-car garage. "I understand."

"I doubt that," David said. "But it doesn't matter. Make yourself at home. See you around."

He trotted up the back steps, pulled off his dusty Wellington boots inside the kitchen door, then padded through the house in his sox. "Yvonne?"

"Out here," she called. He followed the sound of her voice through the kitchen to the dining room. And stopped. The table was draped in white linen with place settings for four. Damn. He continued on through the french doors that opened onto the elaborate redwood deck that overlooked the grounds. Yvonne was dressed for dinner, white slacks, heels, a turquoise Armani blouse, and pearls, her dark hair coiffed to perfection. And she wasn't alone. Vernon and Louise Beck, old family friends of Yvonne's, with the accent on *old*, were seated at a canopied table on the deck.

Double damn.

"You're late," Yvonne said brightly, offering her cheek for his kiss, "but you're forgiven. By the time you've changed I'll have Delmonico steaks on the grill and a salad awaiting your delicate touch, and Vernon's ordered a spectacular sunset to go with dinner. Now hurry up."

"Actually, I'm going to have to pass on dinner," he said, waving hello at Vernon and Louise over her shoulder. "Can I see you in the dining room a second?" Her smile was fading as she followed him in. It was gone when he turned to face her.

"Honey, I'm sorry as hell, but I've got to get back to the clinic. I've got a shorthaired pointer bitch with a smashed hind leg. I'll have to spend the night."

"But David, we have guests."

"All the better. At least you won't be lonely. Besides, listening to Vern drone on about the bond market's the conversational equivalent of a Thorazine overdose for me. I'd just nod out, top-

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ple into the salad, and embarrass you anyway. Make my apologies, okay? I just came home to shower and grab a sandwich. Is there any coffee?"

"No," she said, "but I'll make—dammit, David, you could have called."

"I know, but the break was a lot worse than I expected and the surgery ran long. I don't want to lose the dog."

"Can't Bettina stay with her and call you here if anything goes wrong?"

"Bettina's a good assistant, but she's only a veterinary tech. If anything serious developed, the dog could die in the twenty minutes it'd take me to get there. Sorry, but I'm elected."

"David, this must be the fourth or fifth time in the past couple of weeks."

"Is it? Great, business must finally be picking up. Look, I've really gotta go. Coffee?"

"It'll be ready. But David, we need to talk about this."

"Honey, we have talked about it. I know we've had a rough few years, but as soon as the clinic gets a little better established I can take on a partner, and—"

"You can take on a partner now, and you know it. We can afford it."

"You mean you can afford it," David said coolly. "I can't, and the clinic can't. Not yet, anyway."

"And if it never can?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"This isn't about confidence, it's about reality. The reality is, Algoma may be too small to support a full-time veterinary clinic. I don't think it's fair to put our lives on hold while we wait for business to pick up. It's been nearly four years."

"You're kidding. My, but time flies when you're having fun. Or aren't you having fun?"

"Of course I am, when we're together. But lately you're at the clinic at all hours—"

"Yvonne, I'm sorry, but I don't have time for this now. Let's leave it until the weekend."

"You're attending an orthopedic seminar in Chicago this weekend."

"Then we'll talk when I get back, okay?" he snapped. "Look, I'm not putting you off, but I really have to go."

"David, I want to have a child."

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That stopped him. "Then I guess we really do have to talk," he said, turning to face her. "This is kind of sudden, isn't it?"

"It wouldn't be if we'd had more than a ten-minute conversation in the past few weeks."

"Touché. But I thought you wanted to wait awhile."

"I did. I was hoping my vision might improve, but . . . Dammit, David, I'm thirty-seven. I want to get on with the rest of our life. If we're going to have one together."

"Whoa, that sounds ominous. What does that mean, exactly?"

"That sometimes I have the feeling that you're just passing time here, waiting to go. We're living in my home, and everything you own could still fit into a cardboard box you could toss in the back of your Jeep."

"So I'm not into owning things. I was broke in college. I guess I never got out of the mindset. Nor do I want to, particularly. Look, I know that makes me a square peg in your social circle, but . . . Ah hell, to be continued, okay? Make my apologies to Vern and Louise. I'm outa here."

He tried to kiss her cheek but she turned away. "I'll call you from the clinic."

"Don't bother," she said. "I think I'll retire early."

"Suit yourself. But call me if you want to talk. And babe, if you do decide to have a kid, don't start without me, okay? I've seen your new handyman. I admit he's a major hunk, but he's also a blond. I'd recognize his offspring in a heartbeat."

"You know, there are some things you shouldn't joke about."

"Who's joking?" he said.

He loped upstairs, changed into clean faded jeans and a scruffy Michigan State sweatshirt, then trotted back out to his Jeep. Malley was coming down the outside stairway of the garage apartment. David noted that his spotless shirt and slacks looked like they'd been tailor-made. He gunned the Jeep across the drive and pulled up at the foot of the stairs.

"Did you find everything all right?"

"All set, Doc. I was just gonna start cleaning the stables, unless there was somethin' else you wanted me to do."

"Nope. Whatever Yvonne tells you is job one. I'll be working late tonight, so keep an eye on things, okay? By the way, are you a light sleeper, Greg?"

"Not really, why?"

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"Good. My wife is. And as you probably noticed, her vision's slightly impaired. And the thing is, when I'm gone, she sleeps with a gun under her pillow."

"You don't say? But if she doesn't see very well, how does she know what to shoot at?"

"It's a nine-millimeter automatic. Fourteen rounds. She doesn't have to see very well."

"Point taken," Greg said, with an easy grin. "Don't worry, Doc, I don't sleepwalk. And anybody who does is gonna have to go through me. Which isn't so easy to do."

"Glad to hear it. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Oh, Doc, there is one thing. I saw a kind of . . . weird animal back of the garage."

"Weird? You mean like a three-legged cat with an eye and an ear missing?"

"Coulda been, I guess. I chucked a rock at it."

David's knuckles went white on the steering wheel. "Did you hit it?"

"No, just spooked it off, is all."

"Good," David said, relaxing slightly. "Look, Mr. Malley, we'd better get on the same page on one thing. I'm a veterinarian. Simply put, I fix broken critters. So I'd really appreciate it if you wouldn't toss any more rocks at animals around here. Understood?"

"Sure, Doc, whatever you say. Sorry, I just didn't know what it was."

"Next time, just ask. That was Franken Kat."

"It was what?"

"Not it; she. Her name's Franken Kat; you know, like the movie monster, cat version. She's an old patient of mine. And if you think she looks bad now, you should have seen her before."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know, she was a stray I found by the side of the road, all ripped up. Probably got run over. Took me months, off and on, to put her back together."

"You spent all that time workin' on a stray?" Greg asked curiously. "Why? I mean, nobody's payin' you, right? And what good's a three-legged cat anyway?"

"Hey, she's a terrific mouser. She can't catch any but she spooks the hell out of 'em and they change neighborhoods. Be nice to her, Greg, she's had a tough life."

"So who hasn't?" Malley said.

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* * *

Bettina was sprawled across the cheap vinyl couch in the waiting room reading a back issue of *Veterinary Forum* when David walked in. She'd unpinned her hair, and it hung tawny and loose about her shoulders.

"Hi, how's our patient?"

"Stable," Bettina said, swinging her long legs off the couch and stretching. "Her temperature's slightly elevated, a hundred and three. Her eyes are open, but she hasn't tried to move yet."

"The atropine and acepromazine won't wear off completely for a few hours. I expect she'll have a pretty subdued night. You can take off. Thanks for waiting."

"I'm in no hurry. I thought I'd send out for a pizza and eat dinner here. In case our patient acts up."

"Ummm, that's probably not a good idea. I'll be gone all weekend at that seminar and you have to pull extra duty then. Escape while you can."

"I don't mind spending extra time here, as long as you're here, David. What do you want on your pizza?"

"I'll pass, thanks. Have to watch my waistline. Especially now that my wife just hired a handyman who could do ads for Jockey shorts. His name's Greg Malley. Do you know him?"

"Greg? Sure. He was a couple of years ahead of me in high school. Hot stuff, or at least he was then. As nearsighted as Yvonne is, I wonder how she checked his qualifications? By touch?"

"I presume he gave references."

"From whom? His parole officer? As I recall, Greg was a pretty wild child."

"Are you serious? You think he might be an ex-convict?"

"No, not really. He always was a bit of a hard case, though. Drank too much, ran with a rough crowd. I doubt he ever went to jail for anything. Too smart for that. Cadillac eyes, you know?"

"What kind of eyes?"

"Cadillac eyes. It's an old local saying; Indian, I think. Cadillac eyes, pony money? It means a guy who has big ideas but not much else."

"It's not a compliment, then?"

"Hardly. I'm surprised you haven't heard it. People used to say it about you, sometimes."

"About me?"

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"Sometimes. It's just small-town talk."

"Well, they're wrong about the pony money part. I couldn't afford a pony if it came in a box of Cracker Jacks. And I don't see what's so ambitious about being a small-town vet."

"A small-town vet whose business is so slow he patches up stray cats and dogs? So he marries a rich old maid? While she was still recovering from a nasty traffic accident? You have to admit, it looks . . . opportunistic. Maybe even suspicious."

"I don't give a damn what it looks like. I've never taken a dime from Yvonne."

"Whoa, lighten up. I know that, I do your books, remember? But she *is* a bit older than you are."

"Six years. It doesn't mean a thing. I'm that much older than you are."

"Actually, you're only five years older, and anyway, it's different with men and women."

"The hell it is. Or if it is, it shouldn't be."

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Sure you did," David said drily, "but it's okay. We've always been straight with each other and it's nice to know what the neighbors are saying. Even when they're dead-ass wrong."

"I'm not so sure they are. I mean, just for the sake of argument, let's say you did marry Yvonne for her money. You were fresh out of school so you must have been awfully broke, right? But it's been four years now. And since you apparently aren't collecting on your investment, maybe you ought to rethink things."

"Thinking was never my strong point, let alone rethinking. What are you getting at?"

She took a deep breath, then squared her shoulders and met his eyes. "What I'm saying is, that maybe Yvonne isn't the only one with a vision problem, David. You two have very little in common, and you can't feel very comfortable with her stuffed-shirt, country-club friends. I suppose she's attractive enough if you like the prim type, but I'm not exactly chopped liver myself. Some people even think I'm pretty. And since you and I share the same professional interests, I think we'd make a great team."

"Yvonne said earlier that there are things we shouldn't joke about. I'm beginning to see what she meant."

"I'm absolutely serious, David."

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"No, you just think you are. But I'll admit you're at least partly right. You're a lovely girl, Bett, a stunner, in fact. And we already make a terrific team, professionally speaking. As for the rest, I'm afraid I'm a lost cause. Maybe marriage is the one thing I do take seriously. Marriage and sick animals, that is."

"Bad marriages break up every day, David. Can you look me in the eye and tell me you're happily married?"

"If I can't, it wouldn't matter," he said, his tone cooling a bit. "Not all of our passions make us happy. And we're going to drop this subject now, okay? Permanently."

"Whatever you say, Doctor. I think I'll go, then. If you need me for anything, I'll be at home."

"You don't have to wait up. I've got a hunch this hound's gonna come along fine. And Bett? Just for the record, maybe the town's right. Maybe I did have Cadillac eyes for Yvonne when I came here. But you're wrong about her. She wasn't an old maid. She was the most . . . formidable woman I'd ever met. She still is. And I would have married her if she'd been broke, barefoot, and wearing burlap. Sometimes I wish she had been. It would've made things a whole lot simpler."

"My God, you're really serious, aren't you? I wonder if Yvonne realizes how lucky she is?"

"I sure as hell hope not," he said. And for once Bettina couldn't tell if he was kidding.

David was right about the hound's recovery. She was up and limping gamely around the next day and her temperature gradually returned to normal. Yvonne's temperature, though, remained decidedly chilly. She was civil but withdrawn, her eyes unreadable behind her smoked glasses. David tried to josh her out of her mood, but for once his warped sense of humor fell flat. He decided to play it cool, walk soft, and back off. This, too, shall pass. Maybe.

Greg Malley seemed to be working out all right, though David noticed that he seemed busiest when he sensed someone watching. The third day, he stopped David as he walked out to the Jeep in the morning. Greg was wearing gloves. And carrying a dead rat by the tail.

"Hey, Doc, I guess you were right about that weird cat. It must've scared this guy clean to death."

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"I doubt that," David said, frowning. "It's a barn rat. I think he'd be a little out of Franken Kat's league. Is that blood on its butt?"

"Looks like it," Greg said. "Mostly dried. What would cause that?"

"Usually a rat poison called warfarin. It's a powerful anticoagulant. If rodents eat enough of it they bleed to death internally. Where'd you find this guy?"

"In the barn, why?"

"Odd. We don't use warfarin here. Never have. Too many other animals around."

"Maybe this one wandered over from another farm."

"Maybe," David said doubtfully. "But rats don't usually range very far, especially when they're as sick as this one must have been."

"Maybe he heard a doctor lives here. One who fixes strays for free."

"Cats and dogs only. The rats are on their own. Keep an eye open for any more. If their numbers start to build up, we'll have to trap 'em out. These guys could eat Franken Kat for lunch. See ya." He climbed into his battered Jeep.

"Hey, Doc? I found the rat in a horse stall near a grain bucket. Would that make any difference?"

David hesitated. "Why should it?"

"I dunno. Just thought it might. See you later." He turned and walked confidently away, carrying his grim trophy. David watched him go, frowning. Then he fired up the Jeep and headed into the village.

Algoma was small enough that a kid with a fair pitching arm could chuck a rock from end to end. Glen's supermarket anchored one end of the main street, a Forward gas station held down the other. A pharmacy, an Ace hardware store, a doc-in-a-box emergency clinic, a few small shops, and Tubby's restaurant filled the block in between. A black-and-white patrol car was parked in front of the restaurant. David pulled in behind it.

Sheriff Stan Wolinski was alone in his usual spot, a scarred, antique pine table near the front window with a view of the street. He was a big man with a thinning G.I. butch haircut, a square face, square silhouette, and an outlook to match. David slid into one of the heavy captain's chairs facing him.

"Mornin', Doc. What can I do for you?"

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"Help me out with a little background information, I hope. My wife hired a handyman a few days ago, a young guy named Greg Malley? Do you know him?"

"I know who he is. He played football for Algoma High some years back. Defensive tackle, and a pretty good one. He has no local police record, if that's what you're asking."

"That's part of it. Would you give him a character reference, then?"

Wolinski picked up his coffee mug and took a thoughtful sip, then carefully replaced it. "Probably not," he said cautiously. "Greg was a wild kid. He got into a couple scrapes but nothing stuck, you know? Heard he got busted for D.W.I. up at Traverse City last summer. Don't know what came of it."

"Just kid stuff, then? Nothing serious?"

"I didn't say that. I said nothing that stuck. Which actually makes his record cleaner than yours."

"Mine?" David echoed, surprised.

"Sure. I checked you out, Doc, way back when. Some of Yvonne's society friends were worried you were taking advantage of her while she was laid up, you know? Tryin' to sweep her off her feet. So I made a few inquiries, nothing official, you understand. You were arrested once, as I recall. For petty theft. When you were in college at Michigan State."

"Shoplifting," David said evenly. "My roommate and I tried to steal some food from a supermarket. We were broke and hungry and very stupid, in that order."

"I've never worried much about motives, Doc. Everybody I bust has a sad story. I did mention your record to Yvonne once, when I visited her in the hospital. I thought she had a right to know. She said you'd already told her. Somehow I didn't quite believe that."

"You could have," David said, rising to go. "It was true. Thanks for the information, Sheriff. All of it."

"No charge, Doc. And for what it's worth I've got nothing personal against you. But I've known Yvonne most of her life. Maybe I hoped she'd do a little better when she married."

"Somebody like you, for instance?"

"Not at all. Yvonne's out of my league, Doc. And, no offense, but from where I sit, she was out of yours, too."

"Well, at least we agree on something," David said. "See you around, Stan."

"Count on it," the sheriff said.

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David had to leave for the seminar late Friday afternoon. He asked Greg to ferry him to the airport to save parking fees. And to have time to talk to him. Alone. The talking part was easy. Greg liked to talk. Or at least, to listen.

"Does it take a lot of school to be a vet, Doc?"

"At least seven years. Took me ten. I had to drop out a couple of times to earn money to finish. Why?"

"Just wondered. I figured you had to be pretty smart to fix up animals like you do. Even if some of 'em turn out lookin' like that Franken Kat."

"The eye of the beholder, Greg. She's beautiful to me."

"Your wife doesn't seem to like her much."

"Yvonne's vision is pretty limited, so when Franken Kat lurches out of whatever corner she's in, they spook each other sometimes, that's all."

"What happened to your wife's eyes? I noticed she's got a couple little scars. Some kind of accident?"

"She rolled a car in the rain four or five years ago."

"That was before you got married, then?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Oh, I don't mean to be nosy, I'm just passin' the time, you know?"

"Fine. So pass some about yourself. You grew up in Algoma, right? But since you didn't know about my wife's accident, you must have been away for a while. Where, exactly?"

"Just driftin' here and there."

"I said exactly," David said. With an edge in his voice.

"Hey, you sound serious. Okay, I traveled with a carnival awhile, then worked oil rigs in Oklahoma. Got tired of driftin' and came back to Michigan last year. Worked in a hospital for a few months over at Traverse City."

"Funny, you don't strike me as the hospital type. Do you have medical training of some kind?"

"Naw, I was just helping out, like a volunteer, you know?"

"Or like community service? The kind they give you instead of jail time?"

Greg glanced at him sharply, then smiled that lazy grin. "That's exactly the kind. I spent two hundred hours working in the detox ward there, where they dry out drunks. Very educational."

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"In what way?"

"I quit drinkin', for one thing. Looked at some of those ol' boys and saw my future. Didn't much care for the view."

"And you see shoveling horseshit as a career advancement?"

"Bein' a handyman suits me for now. Gives me time to think. I've been thinkin' I might like to be a writer. Write the story of my life, maybe. Or maybe yours. That English guy, Herriot? He made a lotta money writin' about bein' a veterinarian. Maybe we could do the same thing."

"We?"

"Sure. You tell me some great vet stories, I'll write 'em down, we'll both get rich."

"I don't think so."

"Why not? No offense, but I can't help noticin' the way you live: this Jeep, your clothes. Your missis keep the purse strings tied pretty tight, does she?"

David glanced at him. "I wouldn't know. I've never asked her for money. Not that it's any of your business."

"Sure it is, Doc. If I'm gonna write the story of your life I need to know all the details. But if you're touchy about money, maybe we oughta stick to the vet stuff. Like, what's the fastest diagnosis you ever made?"

"The fastest? It doesn't work that way. Some things are easy to see, like a broken leg, but most aren't. And animals can't tell you where it hurts."

"So if you're a vet, bein' a fast worker isn't necessarily a good thing?"

"No, why?"

"Oh, I just heard a story once from one of the winos at Traverse, about a vet that cured five horses in just a couple minutes. Never even examined 'em. Just ran into the barn, gave 'em each a shot, and ran out. Fastest vet in the West."

"Or the most incompetent. What was wrong with the horses?"

"Dunno. I'm not sure the wino told me. And maybe he was lyin'. Does the story sound likely to you?"

"No."

"I didn't think so either. Still, the old guy told me other things that were true, so I thought this story might be, too."

"Like what?"

"Just local gossip about doin's in Algoma. Stuff that happened while I was gone."

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"He was from Algoma?"

"Didn't I mention that? Yeah, that's why we hit it off so good. Big hospital like that, two homeboys runnin' into each other in the detox ward. Spent a lotta time talkin', you know? In fact, he was the reason I decided to try bein' a handyman for a while. That's what he'd worked at, before the bottle got him. Even worked at your place for a while. Well, not your place, your wife's, I mean. It was before the accident, before you two got married. Guy's name was Carl Willis. Remember him?"

"I'm . . . not sure."

"Funny, he remembered you pretty clearly. But I guess he'd be easy enough to forget. He was just a handyman, and a drunk to boot. Your wife's uncle fired him. Fact is, he kinda blamed ol' Willis for her accident. Said if he'd cared for the horses better they wouldn't have gotten sick. And your wife wouldn't have gone tearin' into town to fetch a vet and cracked up her car. Well, here we are." He swung the Jeep into the airport entrance drive and parked in front of the terminal. David climbed out and lifted his suitcase out of the back.

"See you in four days, Doc. Don't worry about a thing. Sure wish you'd think about us writin' a book together, though. Between the two of us, I'll bet we could make a killing."

David watched him drive off, all the way out to the highway. Then he turned and trudged into the terminal, lost in thought. He was going to have to do something about Greg. He just didn't know what.

But the following Tuesday, Greg didn't meet him at the airport. Instead, Bettina was waiting at the gate when his flight disembarked. She was dressed in a Michigan State T-shirt and jeans, casual, but they set off her figure well, as though she'd chosen them with care.

"Hi," she said brightly. "I hope you don't mind the change in plan. Greg's driving your missis to Traverse City for a shopping trip. She asked me to pick you up."

"What kind of shopping trip?"

"Clothes, I think. Greg's quite a dresser when he wants to be, maybe she wanted a man's opinion. Which is just as well. I wanted to talk to you alone anyway."

"Why alone?" he asked, after he'd tossed his suitcase into the trunk and folded himself into the front seat of her tiny bottle-green Geo Metro.

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"Discretion," she said, skillfully piloting the car through the crush at the airport gate and heading south. "You have a problem, maybe two, and if you're going to blow your stack, I'd rather you did it privately, with me."

"Why should I blow up?"

"Because you're not going to like what I have to say. It's about your wife, and Greg. And the office."

"What about my wife?"

"Maybe nothing. But Greg's been squiring her out and about quite a bit the past few days."

"So she hasn't had anyone to drive her around for a while and she's making up for lost time. I admit Greg Malley's a hunk by some standards, but Yvonne's not the sort to flip over some muscle-bound clown she's only known a few days."

"Why would you think they've only known each other a few days? They both grew up here and he was a local football hero. She must have known who he was when she hired him."

"Somehow I doubt that they moved in the same circles."

"Why? You mean because she's older and richer than he is? That didn't bother her where you were concerned."

"Look, Bettina, I'm willing to cut you some slack because we're friends and colleagues, but you're out of line. Drop it."

"No problem," she said archly. "If I offended you, I apologize. I only mentioned it because of the other problem. I think you mentioned once that Yvonne isn't computer literate, right?"

"She has difficulty reading the screen," he acknowledged. "Why?"

"Because someone got into the office computer over the weekend."

"What do you mean, someone got into it?"

"Used it. I'm a fastidious housekeeper, David. I remember where I leave things. When I opened the clinic Monday morning, I could tell someone had been there."

"You mean they broke into the building?"

"No, that's what made it seem all the more odd. There was no sign of a break-in, and nothing seemed to be missing. I checked the drug supply first thing and it was okay. But someone had definitely been at the computer."

"Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely. Whoever the burglar was, he wasn't all that careful about it. He left a three-and-a-half-inch floppy in the slot

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and put the others back in the wrong order. It was almost as if he wanted me to notice."

"What was on the disks?"

"The office financial statements. Records, purchase orders, billing, the works. Even your income tax returns. It's possible he looked at other things, too, patient records or whatever, but the financial statements were the only things that were obviously disturbed."

"That makes no sense at all."

"Not to me," Bettina said carefully. "I thought it might to you. Is there something going on you haven't told me about?"

"Like what?"

"You tell me. Since the burglar didn't have to break into the office, he must have used a key. And the only keys I know of are yours and mine. And I presume your wife has one."

"There are spare keys at home, sure, but if Yvonne wanted to know about the office records, she could just ask me."

"Unless there's a reason she didn't want to ask you, or didn't want to rely on your word for it."

"What are you getting at?"

"Maybe it's just wishful thinking on my part, but it occurred to me that a smart wife, one like Yvonne, for example, might want to know exactly what her husband's finances were. If she were considering a divorce, for instance. I don't suppose anything like that's in the wind?"

"Not . . . that I'm aware of, and I think I'd know. And you've got a very devious mind."

"Thank you. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No. Since it wasn't a break-in, exactly, I thought I'd better talk to you first."

"Good. You did the right thing, Bett. I'll handle it."

"Handle what? Aren't you going to tell me what's going on?"

He started to reply, hesitated, then shook his head. "No," he said. "I guess not. But, ah, look, there's no easy way to say this. I think you'd better start looking for another job."

"What? You mean . . . you're firing me? Why? Look, I really didn't mean to offend you. I was only trying to help."

"It's nothing like that. You've been a terrific assistant and you'll probably make a fine vet someday. But I've got some problems here that I don't think I can solve, without . . . Anyway,

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however things turn out, I'll probably be leaving, maybe quite soon. I'll give you a glowing recommendation and severance pay, of course. I'll mail it to you."

"David, I don't understand."

"Maybe not, but you will. I need one last favor, Bettina." He took an envelope from inside his jacket and handed it to her. "Give this to my wife tomorrow. Please."

"Of course. But . . ."

"No buts. Just see that she gets it. Thanks for the lift, and the friendship, and . . . Well, you know. Good luck, Bettina."

She left him at his front door and drove off slowly, watching him in the rearview mirror all the way out the gate.

He waited until she was gone before entering the house. It was silent and empty. Good. It didn't take him long to pack the odds and ends of clothing that weren't already in his flight bag. Yvonne had been right. He tossed a few books into a cardboard box, added a couple of photographs, and it was as though he'd never been there.

He loaded them into the back of the Jeep, then, on a whim, went back into the house and trotted up to his wife's bedroom and checked the top drawer of her nightstand. The gun was there, the nine-millimeter Glock automatic. He stared down at it for a long time, lost in thought, but in the end he left it where it was.

Then he walked over to the servant's quarters and used his passkey to let himself into Greg's room. He searched it quickly but thoroughly. He didn't find anything useful. Hadn't really expected to. He left the room in mild disarray, the door ajar.

He walked to the barn and whistled, long and low. And after a moment, an ungainly three-legged figure lurched out of the shadows and made its way to him. He knelt and scooped Franken Kat into his arms and carried her to the Jeep. Then he climbed in, took a long last look at the house, and drove into the village to his office.

He opened a can of cat food in the fridge and set it out for Frank, but she was more interested in exploring the office, sniffing for scents, peering into nooks and crannies with her one good eye.

He left her to it. He unlocked the drug cabinet and got a 5-cc syringe with a short 22-gauge needle. He filled it with tincture of iodine, then emptied it into the sink and washed away the

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stain. He attached a short piece of adhesive tape to the barrel of the empty syringe and placed it on his desk next to the computer.

He spent the next few hours at the office computer settling up his bills. The office phone rang twice. He didn't bother to answer it. He was halfway through Bettina's letter of recommendation when a car pulled up in the lot out front. He paused long enough to slide the used syringe up his sleeve and tape it to his wrist. And then he was out of time.

Greg Malley stepped into the office and glanced warily around. He was wearing a sport jacket over his usual T-shirt and jeans. The cut of the coat accented his broad shoulders and narrow waist.

"Hey, Doc, good to see you back. How come you ain't been answerin' the phone? Your missis hit panic city when she saw the Jeep was gone, and your clothes with it. Was all I could do to talk her outa comin' down here. Said I'd check you out first, in case you and Bettina maybe had somethin' goin'. But that's not the deal, is it?"

"No. Actually, I've been waiting for you."

"I figured that. What were you lookin' for in my room?"

"Weight. Anything to counterbalance the dirt you think you're holding on me."

"Sorry, Doc, there's nothing to find. I'm clean. But so are you, in a way. I mean, I don't know anything that could send you to jail. All I got's a story I heard from an ol' drunk in detox about some rich lady's horses that suddenly turned sick, started bleedin' from the nose and mouth, and a vet who cured 'em without even lookin' at 'em. Because he already knew what was wrong with 'em, since he'd mixed some warfarin in with their feed a week or so before. How am I doin' so far?"

"It sounds like a fairy tale a drunk might tell."

"Except fairy tales have happy endings and this one doesn't. Because when the lady sees how bad off the horses are, she naturally calls the vet. Only she can't get through. Why was that, Doc? I mean, you set this thing up to get her business, right? So why didn't you answer the phone?"

David sighed. "I was in surgery. Operating on a cat that I found in the road."

"You're kiddin'," Greg said, grinning widely. "You mean that one-eyed abortion, whatchacallit?"

"Franken Kat," David said.

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Greg shook his head in wry amusement. "So the lady panics, drives into town like a bat out of hell, rolls her car, and gets banged up pretty good. And you're so nice to her she ends up marryin' you. Sounds like a happy ending, for you. Only it didn't work out like you figured. She doesn't give you a nickel, does she? Don't look so surprised. I took a look at your books."

"Then you know you can't hold me up. I don't have any money of my own, Greg. Not enough to bother stealing, anyway."

"Oh, I figure your wife might be willin' to lay out some semi-serious cash to hear my little story, but that'd only be a one-time thing, and I've gone to too much trouble to settle for that. Especially since I've figured a way to make this deal pay off big, Doc. We can make a lot of money together, you and me."

"Can we? What have you got in mind?"

"Drugs, Doc, what else? I almost flipped when I read your inventory. Man, you've got a legal drugstore here, and most of it's just as good for people as animals. PCP, half a dozen kinds of steroids, even nitrous oxide. You got any idea how much this stuff is worth on the street? With the right connections, we can both cash in big-time."

"And you can supply the connections, is that it?"

"I definitely know the right people, sure. And it's not like you've got a lot of choice."

"At least we agree on that," David said. "My options are definitely limited. But so are yours."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm leaving, Mr. Malley. I'm already packed and ready to go. I always knew it would come down to this. I've been waiting for it since the day I got married. It's almost a relief."

"Wrong. You're not going anywhere."

"Or what? You'll tell your story to Yvonne? You're a little late. I left a letter for her. It's probably not as colorful as you could make it, but it covers all the details."

"I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want. You can try to sell her your fairy tale tomorrow but it'll be yesterday's news. I doubt she'll give you a plugged nickel for it. And as for us going into the drug trade together, not a chance. None. Give it up, Greg. It's over. We've both lost."

Greg stared at him, blinking, trying to compute what he'd just heard. Then he reached under his jacket and came up with an

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ugly little revolver. "No," he said, "I'm not losing anything. I've put too much time into this. Ever since Willis told me about you, I knew this was my big chance. One way or another."

"You're making a mistake, Greg."

"No more talk! Just get your ass over here and unlock the drug cabinet. I'm damned if I'll come out of this deal empty-handed."

"No," David said, folding his arms across his chest. "I don't think so."

"Yo, Doc, it's not like you got a lotta choice," Greg said, easing back the hammer of the pistol. "I don't figure on shovelin' horseshit for the rest of my life. Or endin' up like Willis, dyin' broke in some detox ward."

"It beats prison, which is where we'll both end up if I open that cabinet. I just won't do it. I've made enough mistakes for this lifetime."

"Damn it, Doc, I'm not—" Greg flinched as a figure suddenly lurched out of the shadows. Franken Kat. He eyed her a moment, then turned to David. "Okay, Doc, you won't do it for yourself? How about your buddy there. You went to a lotta trouble over her, right? So how about I just stomp her some, see if you change your mind?" He lashed out at Franken Kat with his boot. She stumbled aside, barely avoiding the kick. Greg shifted his stance, backing her into a corner. She hissed at him, teeth bared. He raised his foot, but the blow never landed.

With a roar, David launched himself over the desk. His rush caught Greg shoulder-high, carrying them both across the lab table to crash into the counter beyond. David grappled for the gun, but Greg pulled his wrist free and slashed David across the face with the weapon, spinning him around, slamming him into the computer console. David went down hard, dragging the monitor down with him. It exploded on the floor in a shower of sparks and tangled cables. David frantically thrust himself away from the flames and staggered to his feet. To look straight down the barrel of the pistol in Greg's fist.

"Still feelin' frisky, you stupid bastard?" Greg panted, dabbing at a trickle of blood from the corner of his mouth. "Hell, I don't need a gun to handle you. I've busted up guys bigger'n you for laughs. C'mon, Doc," he said, shoving the gun into his hip pocket. "You don't look like the fightin' type to me. Let's see what you got."

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David lunged at him, swinging wildly, but Greg slipped the blows easily and countered with two hard body shots that folded David in half, dropping him to his knees. David knelt there a moment, head down, panting, then stumbled painfully to his feet. And raised his fists again.

"You want more, Doc, I'll be happy to oblige. We got all night." He lashed out with a quick jab that caught David solidly in the ribs, then followed with a hard right cross, flush on the jaw, knocking him across the desk. He grabbed David by the lapels, pulling him upright for another blow. Then winced as David slid a hypodermic from beneath his sleeve and stabbed Greg lightly in the shoulder with it.

"Gotcha," David gasped.

"What the hell?" Greg staggered back, pulled his pistol again, and aimed it at David's head.

"Hold on, now," David said, raising his hands. "Don't do anything stupid. I just gave you a half cc of Xylazine. We use it to knock cattle down, and you weigh a helluva lot less than a cow. You've got roughly fifteen minutes to get an antidote. Or you're dead."

"What?"

"You'll die, Greg. Cardiac arrest. You've got to get to an emergency room. Right now."

"You bastard!" Greg snarled. "I'm gonna—"

"Die," David interrupted. "If you don't get moving. I'll call the emergency room and tell them you're coming and what antidote to get ready. But I won't do it until you're on the road. If you want to shoot, be my guest. But we'll both die. The clock's running, Greg. You've got to go. Now, damn it! Move!"

With a sob, Greg whirled and stumbled out the door. David heard Greg's car roar to life then burn rubber out of the lot, howling away into the dark.

He dropped the empty syringe on his desk, then scanned the wreckage of his clinic. "Frank?" he said softly. "You okay?"

The misshapen cat peered cautiously out with her lone eye from beneath the desk. Then she emerged warily and limped off into the waiting room, on business of her own.

"Smart cat," David said. He gingerly touched his cheek where the gun had caught him. His fingertips came away bloody. He opened the medicine cabinet, found some gauze and alcohol, then walked carefully to the bathroom to clean himself up.

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He'd bandaged his face, but had barely made a dent in the shambles of his office, when a prowl car roared up outside, flashers spinning.

Sheriff Stan Wolinski stepped cautiously through the door, his hand on his weapon. "Holy shit," he growled. "What the hell happened here?"

"Greg Malley and I had a disagreement over his severance pay," David said.

"Is that a fact," Wolinski said, glancing around, taking in the wreckage. "Greg showed up at the emergency clinic, half out of his tree, wavin' a gun around. The night security guard clipped him upside the head, got the gun. He's in an observation room now. Thing is, he was raving about being poisoned. Said you'd given him some kind of shot and he was gonna die. Xylophone or something? Said it really burned. Is he in any danger, Doc?"

"No. He got pricked with a hypo in the scuffle, and it may have stung a little because there was iodine residue on the needle. I told him it was Xylazine. It wasn't, but a small dose wouldn't have hurt him anyway. It's only effective on ruminants."

"On what?"

"Ruminants. Like cattle or elk."

"I see. Well, Greg may be a horse's ass, but you'd never mistake him for a cow. He also ran a crazy story by me about you. Said you'd poisoned some horses once."

"Really?"

"That's what he said. 'Course, he claimed he'd been poisoned, too, and he was wrong about that, wasn't he?"

"Yes," David said, "he was definitely wrong about that."

"You wanna file any charges against Greg, Doc?"

"No."

"I thought not. He won't be filin' any against you either. I already asked. Pity. A mess like this, seems like somebody oughta pay for it somehow."

"Don't worry, it'll be paid for," David said.

"Well, I'll leave you to your busywork," Wolinski said. "By the way, your phone's not working."

"I know. It got stepped on."

"Looks like your whole damned office got stepped on. And you with it," Wolinski said. "Your wife should be along shortly. I called the house when I couldn't raise you here. She was gonna

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catch a cab. I noticed suitcases in your Jeep. You leavin' town, Doc?"

"It looks like it."

"Sorry to hear it," Wolinski said. "Folks tell me you're a good vet. And anybody with guts enough to mix it up with Greg Malley can't be all bad. See ya around, Doc." He walked out without a backward glance.

David sighed and went back to straightening up the carnage in the office. And somewhere in the middle of the job he realized that he wasn't alone. Yvonne was sitting on the waiting-room sofa, knees together, hands clasped on her lap. Waiting. She was wearing a simple black blouse and slacks and her hair was tousled. And somehow she still looked elegant.

"I'm sorry," David said. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I . . . wasn't sure you'd be alone. I didn't want a scene. My God, what happened to your face?"

"Your new handyman used it to demonstrate the fine art of fisticuffs. I think I cut that class in college. Kinda wish I hadn't, now."

"You look awful. Shouldn't you see a doctor?"

"I am a doctor. A dog doctor, which is kind of appropriate under the circumstances."

"You mean because you're running out on me?"

"I'm . . . going away, yes. It's best. I left a letter with Bettina that explains—"

"It's all right. I've been expecting it. I've always known you'd go eventually. My God, it couldn't have taken you more than twenty minutes to pack everything you own."

"More like fifteen," David said. "When you read the letter you'll understand."

"I think I understand now. It's about the horses, isn't it? You poisoned some of them."

"That's right." David released a long ragged breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Look, I don't know what Greg told you—"

"Greg didn't tell me anything," she interrupted. "Carl Willis told me about it nearly four years ago. While I was still in the hospital."

David stared at her blankly, trying to make sense of what she'd said. "Are you saying that you knew?"

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"I'm not a fool, David. Neither was Willis. He saw you treat the animals without examining them, though the symptoms could have been for any one of a half-dozen ailments. So when he heard we were engaged, he told me what he suspected. He thought I'd be willing to pay for the information. I told my uncle to fire him."

"I don't understand."

"It's not complicated, David. I was a woman of a certain age at a very low point in my life. I'd partially lost my vision in the accident. But while I was recovering, you were so . . . attentive. I hoped you really did care for me. And that no matter what had gone before, that we might have a chance together. But we didn't. You lived in my house like a lodger and spent most of your time working. And then one day I noticed that deformed cat of yours. And realized how you really felt."

"You've lost me. What's Franken Kat got to do with anything?"

Hearing her name, Frank poked her head out from beneath the sofa and warily cased the room with her good eye. David scooped her up and cradled her in his arms.

"I guess she is a bit of a monstrosity," he admitted, scratching the scar of her missing ear. "You've never liked her, have you?"

"It's not that I don't like her. She's quite a character, in her odd way. But sometimes I can't help resenting her. You were operating on her the day of my accident, and you've done surgery on her several times since, and you've patched together God knows how many other strays. You have a rare gift for . . . compassion. For things that are broken and need care. Like Franken Kat. And me. In a way, Franken Kat and I are sisters."

"You're wrong. It's not the same thing at all."

"Of course it is. I don't see all that well, but it's clear to me. If I'd had more pride, I wouldn't have let it drag on as long as it has. But it's over now, and maybe it's best. But you really should leave the cat with me, David. She won't be happy living in the back of a Jeep."

"No, I suppose not," he said, gently passing Franken Kat to Yvonne. Frank squirmed for a moment, then settled down, accepting Yvonne's stroking as her just due.

"Look, I know it won't mean much to you now," David said quietly, "but I'm sorry. About the accident. About everything. I never meant to hurt you."

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"The accident wasn't your fault. It was raining and I was driving too fast. It could have happened anytime. I would like to know one thing, though. Willis was sure you poisoned the horses. Is it true?"

"I dropped a fistful of warfarin in their grain." He nodded grimly, avoiding her eyes. "The symptoms are ugly, but the horses were never in any real danger. Still, it was a lousy thing to do."

"Yes, it was. I'd have you thrashed within an inch of your life if somebody hadn't beaten me to it. Even now it's hard for me to believe you actually did it, knowing how you are with animals. You must have needed the money desperately."

"Money?" he echoed, blinking. "You think I did it for money?"

"What else? Some of my friends told me to my face that you were a fortune hunter."

"Ah, the man with Cadillac eyes, you mean?"

"That phrase came up, yes."

"And you believed it? Look at this place, for God's sake! Do you think anyone who gave a damn about money would choose to be a small-town vet? I never even thought about it until I met you, and only then because your money and class put you out of my league. But you had horses you loved, and I thought if I could pull off a miracle cure . . . Ah, hell. And then it all went wrong. But while we're clearing the books between us, there's something else you may as well know. When you were in the hospital, I deliberately took advantage of the situation to con you into marrying me. And that was probably a lousy thing to do, too. But I'm not sorry I did it. I'm only sorry you got hurt. And that it's over."

She stared at him for what seemed like a very long time, then shook her head slowly. "My God, we've been together nearly four years, and the truth is, I don't really know you at all, do I?"

"I'm not sure anyone truly knows anyone, no matter how long they've been together."

"Then maybe it's not so important. Maybe what matters is fitting the pieces together into something that works. Like you did with Franken Kat, here," she added, stroking the feline's scarred brow. "We don't understand cats. We don't know their thoughts, and they couldn't care less about ours. And yet we live together. Quite happily, sometimes. How many times did you operate on her?"

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"Three," he said. "Most people don't think the results are very pretty."

"And does it matter so much what people think?"

"Not to me. And certainly not to her. But then we're strays, she and I. We have no family or old friends here. You have."

"If you think their opinions matter all that much to me, then you don't know me very well either," Yvonne said. "But one thing I don't understand is how you could go to so much trouble over . . . Franken Kat, and then decide to leave her."

"It's not that I want to leave. It just seemed like the right thing to do. Don't you think it is?"

"I honestly don't know. So much has happened . . ." Her voice trailed away.

A deep bass rumbling from Franken Kat broke the silence, startling them both.

"What on earth is that noise?" Yvonne asked.

"Her vocal cords were damaged. I've never been able to tell whether she's purring or growling when she does that. Maybe you'd better put her down."

"No," Yvonne said, rocking the disfigured cat gently in her arms. "I'll take that chance." ●

"We're so good together this way."

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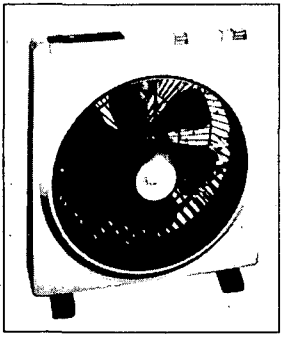

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SHAFTED

by Charlotte and Aaron Elkins

There aren't that many people around these days who can say "Pshaw" and get away with it, but take my word for it, Henry Weaver is one of them.

"Pshaw, Ben," he said, slapping the morning *Herald* onto my desk and scattering the files I'd been working on for two hours. "Whole thing's all bollixed up. Completely turned around. Absurd." And again for good measure: "Pshaw."

This, you understand, was by way of greeting. Henry has never been famous for his way with words, and age has failed to mellow him. People in Scallop Bay often think of him, with a certain fondness, as a man with a crusty exterior and a heart of gold. The crusty part I can confirm, but I'm not so sure about the other. Not that I mean to say there's any real meanness in him, but good God, if you want to talk about cranky, know-it-all, interfering old buzzards . . .

"Anything in particular, Henry?" I asked pleasantly—as pleasantly as could be done through clenched teeth—"Or do you just mean generally speaking?"

"Whole damn thing. Read it." A knobby finger tapped the boxed article on page one.

In *Encyclopedia Mysteriosa*, William DeAndrea described Aaron Elkins as a writer with a "dedication to old-fashioned whodunit plots . . . and a penchant for creating believable and likable characters." The series for which Mr. Elkins is best known features archaeologist detective Gideon Oliver. In 1989 the author collaborated with his wife, Charlotte Elkins, to produce the golfing mystery novel *A Wicked Slice*. They join forces again here with a traditional mystery short story. †

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"I've read it." Hell, I'd practically written it.
Imperiously, the horny fingernail tapped again. "Read it."
I read it.

Coroner Rules Murder-Suicide in Sea Eagle Deaths

SCALLOP BAY—The deaths of a prominent Sea Eagle Golf and Country Club couple have been ruled a murder and a suicide.

Dune County Coroner Simon Galumbie this morning said that Adele Haskell, 66, was murdered by her husband Stanley, who then committed suicide. Haskell, 84, who had made his fortune in pharmaceuticals, was well known for his extensive collection of golf memorabilia.

Scallop Bay Police Chief Ben Rinucci said that Mrs. Haskell was killed with a single blow by a club from her husband's collection. The hickory club, an 1854 "niblick" made by the renowned Scottish club maker Hugh Philp, was broken in the attack and lay beside her. Mr. Haskell then shot himself in the head with his own Smith and Wesson revolver, which was still in his hand at the time the bodies were discovered in the couple's seaside mansion, according to Rinucci.

Rinucci believes the two deaths were the result of a domestic dispute.

"Well?" Henry said when I looked up.
"Well?" I said.
"Domestic dispute," he muttered, oozing scorn. "Preposterous." (Henry's also pretty good with "preposterous.") One tangled white eyebrow shot up and quivered. The red-rimmed, pale-blue eyes underneath glared at me. "Bungled it, Ben. From start to finish."
"Oh?" I said with what I hoped was a receptive smile. "Could you be a little more specific?"

No doubt you've been wondering about this stoic reserve that I was so manfully displaying—well, there were reasons for it. First of all, there was Henry himself. The old boy had done more than his share to put Scallop Bay on the map. We all owed him a debt. It was Henry and a small group of cronies who had come together forty-three years before to purchase the wild strip of coastal land that they had then developed into the Sea Eagle Golf and Country Club, which in turn had transformed Scallop Bay from a crossroads smattering of fruit and vegetable stands into one of the South Coast's premier residential communities, with a tax base to knock your eye out.

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But that was a long time ago. A *long* time ago. Then, at an age when he should have been basking in the mellow, reflective sunshine of his Golden Years and dandling his great-grandkids on his knee and so on, suddenly and cantankerously he decides that the town is in need of his presence again. At eighty-one he runs for the five-member city council against the advice of his family, his friends, and his doctors. He runs, and dammit if he doesn't win. That was two years ago, and ever since he's been the terror of the city's departments. Lately, to my unending grief, he's turned his attention from parks and recreation (leaving the director a gibbering wreck) to the police department. Nowadays it's rare that three days go by without his coming in to sputter, not very coherently, about the mishandling of one case or another.

But until this happened, it's never been anything more important than a traffic violation or a domestic dispute (of the nonlethal variety), and it was always possible to mollify or even accommodate the old guy once I could figure out what he was prattling about. But this was the most sensational crime in Scallop Bay's history. Newspapers across the country were covering it. Nothing remotely like it had ever happened here; in my fourteen years on the job it was only my third murder, and the first two had involved transients, so they didn't really count.

"Specific?" Henry said, and issued one of his infrequent complete sentences. "Stanley never killed her, how's that suit you for specific?" Then, more characteristically: "Out of the question. Plain as can be. Damn well see it for yourself."

I took a deep breath. It didn't help, but a moment's reflection did. Of course he was upset. Who wouldn't be? With Stanley's death, all of his contemporaries were gone. And Stanley had been more than a contemporary; he'd been an amicable competitor. Henry was a collector of golf antiques too, if not quite in Stanley's league, and the two of them could be seen on the club terrace on sunny afternoons, drinking their straight-up martinis, watching the golfers come in, and arguing happily, or at least spiritedly, about the relative values of smooth versus knife-cut gutty balls, or James McEwan versus Robert Forgan long-nose woods. Once upon a time they'd both been avid golfers, but for many years now their collections had been considerably more exciting than their golf games.

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"Well, I certainly see your point, Henry," I said, sacrificing honesty for diplomacy, "but the thing is, the paper didn't report everything. Let me fill you in on our investigation."

That was always a good ploy, making the old gaffer feel that he was privy to inside information. I explained the facts of the case: There had been no break-in, there were no items missing, no sign at all of burglary. The club had Stanley's fingerprints on it; the bullet wound in his temple had powder burns around it, indicating that the shooting had been at point-blank range; the gun was still in his hand—

"Already read that," Henry interrupted testily. "I can read, can't I?"

"The coroner says—"

"Simon Galumbie's a fathead," opined Henry—the first words with which I was in total agreement. "Ought to get a second opinion. Somebody higher up."

"There isn't anybody higher up than the coroner, Henry. He's elected, remember? The only thing I could do would be to call in the state medical examiner's office—"

"Then do it," Henry snapped. "I want this looked into."

This was pushing it. I bristled. "Well, now, just one—"

Henry bristled right back at me, that scrawny jaw thrust forward, the tendons standing out on his neck like braided strings. "You have a report ready at the next commission meeting, Ben, or I'll want to know the reason why."

I could feel my eyes, which tend to be a little protuberant anyway, bulge a little more, but in the end I sank back in my chair, a beaten man.

Ah, the joys of serving at the pleasure of a city council. Where else did you have not one but five different bosses to keep satisfied, every one of them a raving independent? Of course Henry was only one vote, and an eccentric one at that, practically always at odds with his fellow members, so there was little the old coot could do besides making things unpleasant, which he regularly did anyway.

But there was another reason for tiptoeing around him. The fact is that I'm a pretty avid golfer myself and I'd been giving a lot of thought to applying for membership at Sea Eagle. Myra was after me all the time about it, and now that she had inherited from her mother, we could actually afford it. And to be honest, it appealed to me too, not that I'd ever admit it to Myra.

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I grew up in the old Scallop Bay, you know—my father was one of those fruit peddlers—and between you and me, it seemed like it'd be a hell of a thing for a ragtag kid christened Beniamino Enzo Guglielmo Rinucci to get into a blue-blood kind of outfit like Sea Eagle. I sort of felt like I owed it to my father, if you know what I mean. But election to the country club needed approval by the directors, any of whom could blackball me. And Henry, as a club founder, was a lifelong *ex officio* member of the board. . . .

"Yes sir," I mumbled at last. "I will."

"Speak up," he said. "How do you expect me to hear you?"

I supposed that the gritty sound in my ears was from my teeth grinding. "Yes sir," I said more clearly, but then I couldn't stop myself from adding: "You wouldn't care to tell me who did murder her, would you? If Stanley didn't?"

Henry was all ready with his answer. "Who inherits?" he said. "That's where I'd start."

Ordinarily, I think of myself as a pretty thick-skinned guy, not the type whose ears get singed very often, but the next afternoon they were burning for the second day in a row. This time the heat came from Davis Kornbloom, newly appointed Deputy State Medical Examiner, who had taken less than two hours at the morgue to arrive at his preliminary conclusions—the mind-boggling upshot of which was that Henry had hit the nail on the head. Stanley Haskell had been the victim, not the perpetrator, of homicide.

"But . . . " I stammered, ". . . but what about the gun? He still had it in his hand."

But, Kornbloom had pointed out (pretty smugly, if you ask me), the victim's hand was the last place you would expect to find it. In suicides with handguns, the weapon was generally thrown several feet, or at least dropped, when the shock to the nervous system caused the victim to fling out his arms. If a weapon was found in a suicide victim's hand, it was usually due to the hand's having been fixed or supported in some way. Hadn't the chief known that?

Well, no, I guessed I hadn't.

And as for those powder burns, explained Kornbloom, they merely indicated that the gun was fired at close range; they didn't indicate who pulled the trigger. True, murderers didn't generally manage to get their guns right up against their vic-

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tims' temples without a substantial struggle (of which there was no sign at the Haskells'), but a frail, eighty-four-year-old man would hardly have given an able-bodied killer much trouble.

"Sure, okay," I said, "but that's not enough to prove murder. You said 'usually,' didn't you? In other words, 'not always,' right?"

Kornbloom, not yet thirty despite his balding blond pate, and with the ink barely dry on his Ph.D. in forensic pathology and criminalistics, beamed patronizingly at me.

"No, no, there's more, of course. Let me try to explain," he said kindly.

That's what started my ears tingling. *Try* to explain?

Possibly, Kornbloom said, speaking slowly and clearly, the chief remembered that there was a considerable amount of blood on Haskell's right hand—the hand with the gun?

Yes, I said sharply, I remembered quite well. There was a lot of blood in a lot of places. Bullets had a way of doing that.

Of course they did, said Kornbloom, but while finding blood on the back of a suicide victim's hand was common, finding it on the *palm* was not, inasmuch as the hand would have been wrapped around the weapon's grip at the critical moment. Had the chief not been aware of that?

Well, no, I supposed I hadn't. Scallop Bay is a pretty peaceful place, although it picks up some in the summer, when we have to hire a couple of temporaries. But even then, there isn't too much in the way of either gunshots or suicides, and no one could call me an expert, least of all me. That's why I have to rely on experts. Like Galumbie.

And in those few handgun suicides where the palm *was* blood-spattered, Kornbloom continued, one would expect that the patterns of blood on the hand and the grip would match. If they didn't, surely Chief Rinucci could see that it indicated that the gun was placed in the deceased's hand later, after the blood had begun to dry.

Well, yes, I supposed I could see that. And the patterns didn't match, is that what Kornbloom was getting at?

Indeed, that was what Kornbloom was getting at. They didn't come close to matching. He would go into it more thoroughly in his written report. But in the meantime the chief would do well to get started looking for his double-murderer. Statistics showed that every day that a homicide went unsolved, the probability of eventual resolution dropped by another twenty percent.

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Had the chief been aware of that?

No, the chief hadn't been aware of that, and he didn't much give a damn. My problem wasn't statistics, my problem was that I'd screwed up—royally; like a green kid on his first beat. When Galumbie told me it was murder-suicide, "a no-two-ways-about-it, open-and-shut case," I'd bought it. I'd known the Haskells hadn't been getting along too well, and what with the findings at the scene . . . Lordy, I muttered at myself as Kornbloom left, would there ever come a time when I would learn, really learn, not to jump to easy conclusions?

I creaked back in my swivel chair, lit one of the Antonio y Cleopatras that Myra wouldn't let me smoke at home, and gave myself up to thought.

Who inherits? Henry had said.

Well, I already knew who inherited. Not because of any painstaking investigation, I'm sorry to say, but because I'd happened to run into Ed Massie, the Haskells' lawyer, the day before, and I had asked, out of nothing more painstaking than curiosity, to whom they'd left their money.

"It's a little complicated," Ed had said, "because they had mutual-beneficiary reciprocal wills, y'see, but the upshot is that Adele's money, of which, between you and me, there isn't all that much—a million would be pushing it—mostly goes to Grinnell, her old college in Iowa. Now, Stanley's—and here we're talking major numbers, probably fifteen million by the time all's said and done—that goes, kit and caboodle, to his nephew in Kensington. Everything but that golf collection, which goes to a museum."

"His nephew Monte?"

Ed nodded. "Only nephew he had. Sole living blood relative."

So there it was: The sole individual to profit from the Haskells' deaths was Stanley's nephew Monte. But as a suspect Monte was a dead end. For one thing, he was a prominent commodities trader in the City and very probably even richer than his uncle; as a murderer for profit, he was an unlikely candidate. More significantly, Stanley had recently been diagnosed with an inoperable liver tumor and had been told that he wasn't likely to live more than six months at the outside. Monte knew that as well as anybody else—it wasn't any secret. So why would someone who knew that he was in line to inherit a fortune feel im-

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pelled to commit murder—double murder—to speed up the process by six months or so?

In my view that let Monte out, or at least moved him a long way down the list of contenders. But there was someone else, someone right up at the top, and let me tell you, my scalp was crawling at the thought that I'd had him right in my hands and sent him merrily on his way.

At eleven o'clock on the morning of the murders—about two hours after the Haskells had died, according to Galumbie—a couple of bicyclists had seen an old blue pickup truck streak out of the Haskell driveway and roar down Fiske Road. I started a search for it, of course, and the driver turned himself in the next day when he heard we were looking for him. He was a spacey, bearded, twenty-six-year-old loner named Clete Lane, who had been in small-time trouble with the law since he was thirteen, beginning with joyriding and then moving on to drunk driving, auto theft, and breaking-and-entering, for which he'd gotten out of county jail only a few months earlier. He'd been working as a gardener and handyman for the Haskells two or three days a week. His story was that he had reported for work, gone to the house, and seen Haskell's bloody body through the den window. He had panicked and fled, assuming that the first thing we would have done would have been to arrest him.

Which it damn well would have been.

But everything he said checked out—where he'd stepped, what he'd touched, what he hadn't touched, what he'd seen and not seen—and I told Sergeant Tustin to let him go. By then Galumbie had presented his open-and-shut case, so what was the point of holding him? Besides, my instincts told me Lane was just a strung-out, essentially harmless pothead, not a vicious double-murderer.

Well, I sure had my doubts about my instincts now. I drove out to the beat-up trailer that Lane lived in near Bailey's Pond, but the place was locked up and deserted, the pickup truck nowhere in sight. Terrific.

But I thought I knew where he might be, or at least I hoped I did. If I remembered right, he usually worked at Haskell's nephew's place in Kensington on Thursdays. So I got back in the car and drove down the Beach Highway to Kensington, which is even tonier than Scallop Bay, with ten-foot shrubbery walls hiding the mansions from the eyes of the idle curious. They don't

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even have street addresses there. Monte's place just has this little sign on the gatepost out front that says "The Cottage" in Old English letters. Then you drive in and you find out that The Cottage is a two-year-old, two-story fieldstone house with something like twelve thousand square feet and God knows how many bathrooms.

Monte was home, which wasn't all that unusual with his working hours, and the first thing he did was thank me for all my kindnesses to him regarding his aunt and uncle's deaths and especially for bringing the case to such a rapid conclusion, so that everyone could put this terrible tragedy behind them.

You can imagine how good that made me feel. "Maybe we better sit down," I said.

In the oak-floored living room with its twenty-foot-tall, green marble fireplace, with cups of coffee brought to us by an actual maid in an honest-to-God uniform and even one of those little caps, I explained as delicately as I could that the case wasn't exactly closed and that things weren't exactly the way we thought.

"Stanley didn't kill Adele?" he murmured when I'd finished, his round, normally ruddy face pale. His cup shook so much on its saucer that he had to put it down. "Stanley didn't commit suicide? Somebody *murdered* him?" He put his hand over his eyes. "Thank God!" The color came back to his face with a rush. "I mean—"

I smiled. "I know what you mean."

"Do you know who did it?"

"We're working on it. Look, Mr. Haskell, is Clete Lane around somewhere? I'd like to talk to him."

"No, he usually doesn't show up for another couple of—" He stared at me. "It was *Clete?*"

"Well, I just want to—"

"I can't believe it!"

"I didn't say—"

"But Clete's so . . . so timid. I mean, I can't imagine him getting up the nerve to walk into my aunt's bedroom, let alone to . . . to do what he did. It just seems . . ." He spread his hands.

I put my cup and saucer down on the glass-topped end table. "What makes you think it was the bedroom?"

The room suddenly seemed very quiet. "What do you mean?" Monte asked. "I read it somewhere."

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I shook my head. "No, you didn't read it anywhere."

"So where was she killed then? What difference does it make? Oh, the library, I suppose—where he keeps the clubs."

"No," I said, "it was the bedroom, all right." I stood up and gave him my Sergeant Friday look. "Sir, I think it'd be a good idea to go down to the station and talk about this some more."

Monte drew himself up in his chair and glowered at me, his face all hard planes now. He started to say something, changed his mind, clamped his mouth shut, took two slow, raspy breaths, and spoke like the Wall Street veteran he is.

"I want my lawyer there, Rinucci."

Let me make a long story short. This is supposed to be about Henry Weaver, not about me, although I can see why you might not think so by this time.

Anyway, I had my man, but I wasn't all that proud of myself. I'd gone to Kensington to arrest Clete Lane, not Monte, after all, so I could hardly claim superior detective work when he promptly delivered himself into mine hand, as you might say. Also, I didn't have answers to some pretty important questions: If money was the motive, what was Monte's hurry? Why kill two people instead of just sitting tight for six more months, until Stanley made a natural exit? And why kill Adele at all, why not just Stanley? And why go through the risky, complicated folderol of concocting that murder-suicide scenario instead of, say, simply making off with some silver, or a valuable golf club or two, so it looked like an interrupted burglary that blew up into a double murder?

I'm embarrassed to admit it, but Ed Massie had already given me the answers. Remember those mutual-beneficiary reciprocal wills that Stanley and Adele had? What that means, I finally learned, is that the Haskells' immediate heirs were each other. Adele's will left everything to Stanley, and Stanley's left everything except his collection to Adele. Only in the event that the other person was no longer alive would the money go to the college in Adele's case and to Monte in Stanley's.

So: The reason that Monte was in such a hurry was that if he waited for Stanley to kick the bucket on his own, then Adele would inherit, and goodbye fifteen million bucks as far as Monte was concerned. And I think you can see why Aunt Adele had to go too, right along with Uncle Stanley. If Monte had left her

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alive, Haskell's fortune would have gone straight into her lap.

As for making Haskell out to be a murderer, in a sense, that *cost* Monte money because the law prohibits a murderer from inheriting from his victim and thus Adele's money was barred from coming to Monte via Stanley. But Monte wasn't interested in his aunt's piddling million or so; he was after his uncle's fortune. So what he absolutely had to demonstrate was that Adele "predeceased" Haskell, as Ed Massie later put it, so the money would go straight to Monte and not into his aunt's estate.

And what was the surest way to establish it? Obviously (he says now), to make it appear that it was Stanley who killed her.

Simple.

Oh yes, the point of it all? Why would a rich Wall Street trader be in such dire need of money? It didn't take long to find out. Monte, it seems, had personally poured between ten and twenty million dollars of his firm's money down the drain in some spectacularly bad trading decisions on the European futures market and was desperate to cover the losses before anyone found out. My best guess at this point is that he went to see his uncle to ask for an "advance" on his inheritance, or maybe a loan, and Haskell wouldn't budge. In anger or panic, Monte killed him, then did some fast thinking about mutual-beneficiary reciprocal wills and went upstairs to Adele's bedroom to finish the job.

Let's hope we can prove it in a court of law.

That still left me with one burning question. How the hell did Henry Weaver know about it? Or *did* he know about it?

The next afternoon I found him on the sun-soaked flagstone terrace of the club, at the table he'd shared for so long with Stanley, downing a solitary martini and abstractedly watching the day's incoming golfers meet their final challenge (or final humiliation) on the sweeping eighteenth green below.

I cleared my throat. "All right if I sit down?" While Henry might see no problem with barging into my office, scattering my paperwork, and plopping uninvited into a chair, he could be pretty touchy about "his" table.

"Um? What? Oh, Ben." He gestured at a chair and grunted, which I took as an affirmative.

He tutted as a grim, red-faced woman in plaid Bermudas botched a fifteen-inch putt. Without looking at me, he said, "Here to play some golf, are you?"

"Uh, no, I'm not. Not right now." Not in my uniform, with a .38

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on my hip, I wasn't. Not at the Sea Eagle Golf and Country Club.

"Planning to play in the Jubilee Tournament, aren't you?"

"I'm not a member here, Henry."

"Nonsense. 'Course you are."

"No, honestly—"

"Sh. Now watch this fellow. Seen him before. Ought to chip to the green, right? Won't do it. Use a wedge, try to pitch it up and on, and wind up in the left bunker. Now you just watch."

Into the left bunker it went.

"Ha," said Henry with deep satisfaction, and finally turned to me. Clearly, he was in one of his mellower moods. Possibly this was his second martini. "Well, if you're not a member, you ought to be. Could use some young blood. Be glad to put you up if you like."

"Thank you, Henry," I managed to get out. I began to think that the heart-of-gold people might have something after all. "And there's something else I have to thank you for."

He sipped his martini, watched the action on the green, and listened while I told him about Monte.

"Well, fine," he said. "More like it."

"Henry, I have to ask you something. Did you actually *know* it was Monte?"

He seemed genuinely surprised. "Now how would I know a thing like that?"

"You told me to start with the inheritance."

"Well, of course. Only makes sense."

"Did you know about the reciprocal wills?"

"The what?" His attention returned to the green.

"Well, did you . . . was it the gun's being in his hand?"

"Gun?" he said. "Hand? Now look at that putt, did you ever see a thing like that? Time for Wally to put up the clubs, I'd say."

"Henry," I said, my voice rising in spite of myself, "how in the hell did you know that Stanley didn't kill her?"

He turned from the green and gave me his full attention at last, with a probing, earnest look that said he was wondering how in the world I'd ever gotten to be a chief of police.

"*Club* his wife to death?" he cried. "Stanley Haskell? Are you mad?"

"Well, I know you two were friends, but—"

"Good God, man!" He rose trembling from his chair and stared at me, aghast. *"With an 1854 Hugh Philp hickory-shafted niblick?"* ●

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Art by Greg Voth

TWO FAMILIES

by Neil Jillett

As we hugged goodbye at Melbourne Airport, Gavin said, "I feel awful, Dad, leaving you like this."

"We've been over that."

"I wish I could stay."

"So do I." I was worried that tension and grief made me sound as if I was blaming him. "Your clients can't be expected to do without you indefinitely. Life . . ." I could feel my tongue slipping into clichés. "Work has to go on."

He forced a smile. "No reason we can't go ahead with that white Christmas."

Although I wasn't sure about that, I said, "Wouldn't miss it for worlds." To cover the doubt in my voice, I tried a sad joke. "These airport goodbyes are becoming a habit. Now get on that plane."

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He hugged me again—partly, I guessed, so that I wouldn't see the tears rising in his eyes. He turned quickly, picked up his cabin bag, and without looking back, his free hand raised in a flicked farewell, pushed into the departure lounge. But the automatic doors slid open as soon as they had closed behind him, and his eyes, bright with the tears I had suspected, held mine.

"See you in Prague," he called.

"Budapest first." The words were out before I could stop them. I felt I had committed myself to making the trip that the four of us had roughly planned.

In the taxi back to the house, the exchange of banalities with the driver—weather, football, the state of the nation—failed to edge my thoughts away from the accident. Just being in a taxi was a reminder of the guilt that made me doubt I would ever drive again.

It wasn't my fault. I hadn't even been there. But perhaps if I'd gone with them . . . I might have been able to swing the wheel, to do something. It was a debate I had had with myself a hundred times, although rationally I knew there was nothing anyone could have done on that dark, wet road. Nothing to stop the horror once the semitrailer swung across the center line and hit their car. At least they had died at once. Without knowing what was happening? Or had there been long moments of terror before death?

We called our special fortnight the May Daze. Gavin's visit briefly reunited our small family for the fun that began with his twenty-eighth birthday on May third and ended thirteen days

One of Neil Jillett's early forays into fiction was a black-comedy thriller entitled *Copycat,* which was published by Collins, Australia in 1989. Most of the author's stories for us have also included darkly comic elements, but "Two Families" is an exception, a thoughtful Christmas story about a family's loss. Mr. Jillett was born in New Zealand, but has made his home in Australia since the 1950s; to his characters, the idea of a white Christmas is full of mystery and romance. ❡

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later with Sarah's twenty-fifth. In between there was the party for Anne and me—our thirtieth wedding anniversary and our fifty-fifth birthdays were all on the same day.

"How about you lot coming to see me instead of me having to come all the way out here?" Gavin asked when the May Daze was over. We were at Melbourne Airport, waiting for his call to the plane that would take him on his first flight back to London that month.

"Great idea," Sarah said, "but we can't just up stakes in the middle of the year. We're not carefree, overpaid spirits like you."

"Be fair," Anne said. "He's hardly been in England four years, and this is his third trip back for the May Daze."

Gavin could afford all the travel. As a freelance computer analyst in London, he was earning more than I did as a high-school principal.

"I wasn't thinking of the next May Daze," he said, "but the end of this year and the start of next year. You lot could make it then instead of spending most of summer just lazing around."

His sister laughed, refusing to be annoyed by the standard joke about how little work teachers did. She taught economics at a Ballarat high school. "You'd have to promise snow."

"You've been reading too much Dickens. Christmas snow's not guaranteed in England anymore."

"Well, the Swiss Alps, perhaps, or Salzburg, or maybe the Arctic Circle. There must be a white Christmas somewhere."

Gavin was the only one of us who had been much further north than the equator, the only one who had seen snow other than on antipodean ski slopes. When he and Sarah were children we had gone on camping holidays or motel-hopping around Australia and New Zealand. We had celebrated their coming of age, their eighteenth birthdays, with trips to Bali and Thailand. Several times we had planned holidays in Europe, but whenever it all seemed arranged something cropped up, making it impossible for one of us to go, so none of us did.

"Prague," Anne said suddenly. She stared dreamily out of the window, as if the city of Good King Wenceslas and Kafka had arisen on the tarmac, among the jumbo jets. "I've always wanted to go to Prague."

"Oh," said Sarah, "so have I. I was looking at a book of photos the other day. All those gorgeous old buildings and the statues on the Charles Bridge, little wigs of snow on every one of them."

"But not necessarily at Christmas," Gavin said. "It could just

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be bleak and cold."

I thought it was time someone was decisive. "Well, there's one way of finding out."

Gavin said he'd go along with whatever we decided, and when we had seen him off, the girls and I went to a Chinese restaurant and spent two hours trying to agree, over chopsticks and spilt soy sauce, on the places we wanted to see—Prague at the top of the list, then Vienna and Paris.

"Poor light and rotten weather for sightseeing," Sarah said, "but at least there won't be many other tourists around that time of the year. I've heard Dresden's worth a look."

"Copenhagen, Paris, the English lake district," Anne said, jotting additions to our list.

"We're only going for a holiday," I said, "not to retire there."

"Well, Budapest, anyway," Anne said. "It's near enough to Prague, and some people say it's almost as beautiful."

Over the next few days we kept expanding and shortening our itinerary. Then it was time for Sarah to return to work. She was being driven by Anne, who did research for several social welfare agencies and had a project to discuss with clients in Ballarat.

As they set off in the evening, Anne said, "Don't forget the dog's dinner." Her words had no literal meaning; they were part of a saying-goodbye joke whose origins I have forgotten. These days, now that the pain is not so sharp, I sometimes smile when I think of her last words to me, a reminder to feed a pet we didn't have.

Back in London after the funeral, Gavin, who had never been much of a correspondent, wrote to me regularly, as if to emphasize that the two of us were still a family. He phoned, too, at least once a fortnight, always ending with a reminder to book my flight for Europe.

"Just get yourself here," he would say. "I'll fix everything else."

I didn't feel I had the energy for an ambitious holiday, and I was sure Gavin could find better ways of trying to enjoy himself than introducing his old man to Europe. But it seemed ungracious not to respond to his insistence. Besides, my friends in Melbourne had been so generous with attempts to ease my loneliness that I felt it was time to let them off the hook. If I was in Europe they would have a few weeks free of the obligation to invite me for dinner and Sunday lunch.

So a week before Christmas Gavin met me when I arrived at

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Frankfurt Airport. He had come from London so that we could get straight into our European holiday.

The ground glistened and crunched as we walked to a taxi.

"Looks as if we're going to have our white Christmas," I said.

Gavin laughed. "It's only frost. But keep your fingers crossed. They're forecasting the proper stuff for Eastern Europe."

Thirty hours later snow began to fall as the train took us through the outskirts of Budapest, where we were to stay for three days before going to Prague for Christmas. "Just what the doctor ordered," Gavin said, watching the flakes drift through the late-afternoon air. But by the time we reached our hotel, it had stopped, leaving pavements and buildings barely speckled.

We weren't feeling very hungry, and after a snack in the hotel coffee shop we decided on an early night so that we would be fresh to explore the city the next day.

"Brought your swimming trunks?" Gavin asked.

"As instructed, though I don't see the point in this weather."

"Because when the travel agency booked us in here they said it had the best indoor pool in Budapest."

"To match the best view," I said. Our second-floor bedroom looked out along the Liberty Bridge and up the Danube.

At three in the morning, perhaps unsettled by an unfamiliar bed, I woke up. We had not drawn the curtains, and I saw a whitish movement, a whirling, against the dark grey of night beyond the windows. I walked out onto the balcony, taking with me so much of the warmth of the overheated room that I did not feel cold.

There was a centimetre or two of snow under my bare feet and along the balustrade. More was falling, thicker and faster by the minute.

The small square below, between the hotel's entrance and the bridge, was brightly lit by street lamps among the bare trees. A man and a woman walked towards each other, leaving footprints in the blank snow. The woman had a spaniel on a lead; a poodle frisked ahead of the man. When the dogs met, nose to nose, stumpy tails quivering, the woman unclipped the spaniel's lead. The dogs ran off together on a circuit of the trees and lampposts. As the man reached the woman she held out her arms, and they kissed. It was not just a greeting, but an embrace so intense that, watching them, I felt like an intruder.

"An odd time and place for that sort of thing," Gavin said behind me. "They should be home in bed, like all sensible lovers."

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"Perhaps they're adulterers," I said, "snatching a few furtive moments."

"Adulterers! Furtive moments! Dad, your vocabulary's at least two generations out-of-date."

"Perhaps because I'm old-fashioned enough to place some value on fidelity," I said.

"Sorry." He draped a sweater across my shoulders.

"No, it's me." I wanted him to know he had offended a sentiment, not scraped a nerve. "Just having one of my pompous fits." I turned, clutching my arms across my chest as the cold at last struck through my pyjamas. "You're right. They should be in bed. And so should I."

We were awake again before seven and went to the basement for our swim. The pool, fed by hot springs from a hill behind the hotel, was open to the public. Through the glass doors of a steamy foyer came men and women carrying bundled towels and brushing snowflakes from their shoulders and fur hats. They had walked through darkness and a snowstorm to have their daily swim. Many of these determined citizens of Budapest were elderly; they were wrinkled, stooped, ordinary, but to my eyes they were also as fascinating as characters from an Eric Ambler spy novel of the 1930s. They made me wish, as the couple embracing in the square had done, that Anne and Sarah were with us to share the experience of having an unfamiliar setting give romance and mystery to a mundane situation.

In the lift on the way back to our room I began to cry silently.

Gavin coughed awkwardly as the lift-driver, a fat woman in an overall, stared at me. "A good breakfast's in order before we set out," he said.

From the hotel we walked across the Liberty Bridge. The snow squeaked under our shoes. Flakes were still falling, though less thickly than when I had stood on the balcony. A slight wind flicked them bracingly against our cheeks.

We were the complete tourists. We walked for hours. Sometimes we caught trams or the Metro's Toytown trains. We'd get off after a few stops, checking our map to see where we were.

We strolled through a draughty gallery where a few El Grecos and Rubenses lurked in the gloom amid a jumble of inferior paintings. We photographed each other against the massive statues of tribal chiefs in Heroes' Square, and in a park we ate

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hot dogs and drank Coca-Cola as skaters circled a frozen pond and fathers hauled children on sleds up gentle slopes while mothers waited below, in case of spills and tears. We took a cable car up to Castle Hill, where red-starred fur hats, communist flags, tins of caviar, and other items from the stores of the recently departed Soviet Army were displayed for sale on the ledges of gothic and baroque buildings. Hungry again, we had lunch in a cafe, choosing a local dish, goulash (which surprised us by being more soup than stew), to counteract the guilt provoked by the exotic hot dogs.

It was still snowing as we walked down the hill to the hotel, but two hours later, when we crossed back over the Danube, from Buda into Pest, to enjoy what Gavin promised would be a surprise, it had stopped.

"I've worked out from our tour this morning that we can get there by tram, then train," he said, looking at his watch. "More fun than a taxi."

"Where's there?" I asked.

"Don't be a Buda pest, Dad," Gavin said, making a weak joke of his impatience. "I told you it's a surprise."

At the end of a fifteen-minute tram ride, he consulted our map and guided us around a corner and down into the Metro.

"I wonder if this is the only city in the world where the trains are shorter than the trams?" he said.

"They're probably just as easy to get lost on as anywhere else," I said as one rattled into the platform. I was feeling tired after the day's walking.

"Stop fussing, Dad. Only two stops."

At the first stop the only other people in our carriage got off, and four young men boarded. Budapest people were far from being the scruffy lot I had expected, but these young men looked like a fashion advertisement in *The New Yorker*. They wore cashmere scarves and German and Italian shoes. Their trenchcoats, I guessed, were the genuine London West End article. Their jeans were so artfully shabby they had to be expensive.

"I didn't know David Jones and Harrods were on this line," Gavin said. "You'd think—" He stopped suddenly.

One of the men had taken a knuckleduster from his pocket. He slid it over his fingers and held it up for his friends to admire, like a girl showing off her engagement ring. Then his eye caught mine, and he winked. It had never occurred to me that a wink could be threatening. As I prayed for the next stop to be soon,

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the train slowed down. The platform was empty.

"This is where we get off," Gavin said tensely. "Just take it easy, Dad, even if they follow us."

One of the men made as if to block the doorway, but his friend with the knuckleduster nudged him aside. As we stepped onto the platform, he bowed mockingly and said, in an accent that seemed as much American as Hungarian, "Enjoy the program, gentlemen."

"Bugger it," Gavin muttered as the train moved on. There was a tremor in his voice. "He's spoilt my surprise. I wonder how he knew."

"I didn't hear what he said," I lied, although I felt like saying that, since the station's sign said *Operhas,* it wasn't such a clever guess.

As we emerged from the Metro, Gavin explained that the hotel held season tickets to the Opera House and guests could borrow them. "Only fifteen dollars each, but it's ballet tonight, I'm afraid, not opera."

"Ballet's fine," I said, though he was right—I would have preferred opera. "What is it?"

"Anna Karenina."

"I never thought of Tolstoy as being balletic."

"I don't suppose he did either. It's new, had its premiere last week." Gavin, who often surprises me with facts about subjects I don't expect him to be interested in, added, "Vronsky—if you'll pardon the reference to an adulterer, Dad!—Vronsky's being danced by Zoltan Solymosi. Local boy makes post-communist good. The Royal Ballet in London's put him under contract."

The Opera House loomed monumentally square and statue-studded through the thickening snow, testimony to the seriousness with which nineteenth-century provincial Budapest had challenged the artistic preeminence of Vienna, the imperial capital. But inside, beyond the spacious vestibules and broad staircases, the theatre itself had a jewel-box compactness.

"You could put three of these in the State Theatre in Melbourne," Gavin said.

Amused by his parochial pride, I looked up at the horseshoe of galleries, the gilt and plush, the chandeliers, the allegories painted across the ceiling. "But this is more my idea of an opera house."

As we settled in our seats, I felt a fit of what Anne called the Principal Principle coming on, the headmasterly compulsion to

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impart information. Perhaps, despite his knowledgeable reference to Vronsky, Gavin would like me to outline the plot of *Anna Karenina*. But he offered another of his surprises. *"All happy families are much the same,"* he said, quoting the novel's opening sentence, *"but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."* He rubbed a hand quickly across his eyes. "Sorry. That wasn't a very smart thing to say when we're supposed to be enjoying ourselves."

His voice was husky. Before my fumbling mind could offer a comforting response, the lights went down and the overture started.

Apart from some athletic tricks by Solymosi, the ballet had few highlights. All the pleasure came from the novelty of watching it in that beautiful theatre.

On the Opera House steps Gavin said, "I don't think the train's a good idea at this hour." I agreed silently by clenching my fist, as if there were a knuckleduster on it, and poking it under his nose. The snow stopped as a taxi took us back to the hotel, where we had been told the dining room did not close until midnight.

Our young waiter—Gyorgy, according to the badge on his waistcoat—was grumpy. We soon knew why. There were a few couples scattered through the dining room, but the staff concentrated their attention on one table. A fat man and woman about my age sat there with a man, slightly younger but even fatter, who seemed to be the host. He had one hand under the table. Beside him was a woman of about twenty, slim (though a generous bust was generously exposed by a low-cut dress) and pretty, but enough like the couple for anyone to assume that she was their daughter. The older waiters gathered around this table, making sure that Gyorgy and the other juniors kept their distance. A gypsy orchestra—four string players and a clarinettist—left their stage in the center of the room and reassembled beside the table, which had several rolls of Hungarian money on it. Every time more food or drink was brought to the table the host poked some notes into the waiters' hands. Most of the time, even with his mouth full, he sang, an excruciating, strangulated noise like bad flamenco; it had a dolefulness that suggested his songs must be about love. The gypsies scraped and blew along with him, and he rewarded their servile devotion with tips even bigger than those he had given the waiters.

"Cheer up; there's more than one fish in the sea," Gavin told Gyorgy.

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To make sure the waiter knew what he meant, he put a few German marks on the table. Gyorgy immediately smiled and became attentive; even cracked a joke. "An interesting wine, this '87," he said, pouring, "the first vintage after Chernobyl."

At the other table it was clear from the motion of the host's arm and the girl's dazed expression that his hand was busy under her dress and high up her thigh. Her parents smirked encouragingly.

"Who is he?" Gavin asked, pushing ten marks towards our waiter. "He seems to command a lot of, um, respect around here."

"Frankie is the most important businessman in Hungary, even before the Russians left." Gyorgy's look and tone suggested amazement at our ignorance of the great man. "Katya, the young lady to which he is showing affection, is very lucky. I was at school with her, but she makes like not to know me now."

A young man entered the dining room. Another chair was placed at Frankie's table. As he sat down the new arrival stared at Gavin and me and winked. It was the passenger from the train, the man with the knuckleduster.

"That is Janos," Gyorgy whispered, "the brother of Katya. Because of knowing Frankie first, it is Janos which has helped Katya to be Frankie's new friend." Gyorgy looked bitter, as if someone had stolen his winning ticket in the national lottery. "I was at school also with Janos, but he now makes out that was not so."

"What else does Janos do for Frankie, besides introducing him to his sister?" Gavin asked.

"With a man like Frankie, there are many people which owe things, money and suchlike."

"And?"

"And Janos"—Gyorgy picked up the banknote Gavin had pushed towards him—"he is the boss of those which are making sure what is owing to Frankie, Frankie gets back." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "He has been in many troubles, but Frankie pays those which can make it not matter. Janos looks like very nice boy, but also he is very . . ." He struggled for English words.

"Rough?" I suggested. "Violent?"

Gyorgy nodded twice, and we had to strain to hear what he said next. "Already there are those which say he has much,

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much more than hurt. He has . . ." He silently mouthed the word "killed," and with his back to the other table he clenched his fist and made a small punching gesture. "With one of them."

As if startled by his temerity in saying so much to strangers, Gyorgy hurried back to the kitchen.

"Do you believe him?" Gavin asked.

"Why would he lie?"

"So that gullible tourists will pay to hear his stories—though it's a very odd coincidence that we saw Janos showing off his new knuckleduster and then Gyorgy tells us what he does with it."

Back from the kitchen, Gyorgy hovered silently by our table for a few minutes, then said quietly, as if he could not stop talking about the group at the other table, "Friendship with Frankie is nice for everyone. Every time he has a new special friend it is nice for the friend, nice for the friend's mama and papa. Frankie is very rich."

"It must be nice also for Mama and Papa that Janos works for Frankie."

"That is so," Gyorgy said, envy reviving his sulkiness. "They must be the most happy family in Budapest."

"So old Tolstoy was wrong," Gavin said as we finished our dinner with coffee and Tokay. He walked to the window and pushed aside the curtain. "It's snowing again."

When he came back to the table, I saw that his eyes were bright with tears, as they had been at Melbourne Airport when he'd called out, "See you in Prague," and I'd replied, "Budapest first."

I could feel tears in my own eyes, but, like Gavin, I was smiling too. Across the table we sensed the confusion in each other's minds as we thought of what our family had lost and what was happening to the family at Frankie's table.

"Tolstoy was wrong," Gavin repeated.

"Even geniuses can't be right all the time."

"Perhaps he was only half wrong. Even if all happy families aren't the same, I suppose each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

I nodded towards Frankie's table. "I wonder what Tolstoy would've made of that lot."

"Or us?" Gavin sighed and smiled at the same time, then raised the glass of post-Chernobyl red. "Here's to a white Christmas in Prague and"—he coughed, clearing the huskiness from his voice—"and to those who first thought of going there." ●

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1995 EQMM READERS AWARD

With the expansion of organized mystery fandom over the last decade, a whole new crop of mystery awards has sprung up: The Agatha Awards; the Macavity Awards, from Mystery Readers International; the American Mystery Award; and the Dashiell Hammett prize are a few you may recognize. Some of the prizes are awarded by writers to other writers, some are determined by members of fan conventions that include both readers and writers, and some are given by readers and professionals in the field through the medium of a fan newsletter or journal. Of all mystery's current honors, the *EQMM* Readers Award has the largest pool of potential voters, and it is the only award that reaches beyond the very select group of mystery enthusiasts who participate in fandom to a "general" mystery reading public.

The larger the number of votes cast in the Readers Award competition, the more accurately the result will reflect what the hundreds of thousands of readers of *EQMM* believe to be the best of the year's offerings. That's why we're asking you to take the time to complete and send back your ballot. Make this much anticipated yearly event more exciting through your participation.

The rules for 1995, the eleventh round of Readers Award Voting, are the same as for 1994. Spaces are provided for first, second, and third place selections, but you may vote for just one story or just two if you prefer. A point system will apply in counting the total number of votes received, with all first place choices receiving three points, second place choices two points, and third place choices one point. The story receiving the highest number of points will be the winner. There will be no special award for reprints this year, as scarcely any were published in *EQMM* in 1995. The three Margery Allingham stories, which were originally published in 1930, are not eligible for the award. (See back of this page for ballot.)

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You may want to refresh your memory of this year's selections by referring to the index on pages 154 - 157 before marking your entries. If you can't recall a story title or its author, describe the plot as briefly as you can. Return the ballot itself (no copies will be accepted) to the address below, postmarked no later than the December 31 deadline.

The 1995 *EQMM* Readers Award-winning story will be announced in the May 1996 issue. If you would like to learn the results of the voting before the May issue goes to subscribers, and newsstands, send a standard-size stamped envelope with your name and address (include it with your ballot if you like) and you will hear back from us by late January.

My first selection for the 1995 EQMM Readers Award is:

My second selection is:

My third selection is:

Mail to: The Editors
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine
Dell Magazines
1540 Broadway
New York, NY 10036

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Her Day of Reckoning

by Margery Allingham

Betty Connolly sat at the little writing desk in her room and rested her chin upon one delicate hand. Marie knelt upon the hearthrug at her side, her face pale and strained.

"The last name," said Betty softly. "This time, Marie, things are going to be very difficult."

The girl who had been her assistant and devoted friend through all the daring adventures of the past months looked up and nodded.

"It seems impossible, Miss Betty," she said. "I know it's no good trying to dissuade you so I won't waste my time. But I feel you're taking a tremendous risk. Scotland Yard is angry now; they have been baulked so often that they are on their mettle. They want the Red Rose, and they'll do everything in their power to capture her."

Betty nodded ruefully. "You're right, Marie," she said. "But the name of Luke Drayton is on the list. Until there is a tick against his name, until he has been forced to contribute towards the resurrection of the town he helped to ruin, my work will not be finished, and I shall not be satisfied."

We conclude our selections from Margery Allingham's early short-story series *The Darings of the Red Rose* this month with the final episode in the Red Rose's adventures. First published in 1930, when the author was only twenty-six, the stories are stylistically similar to many of her later writings. They also evoke an era, in effortless detail, and have a charm that comes with a reader's willingness to suspend disbelief. The five stories in the series that have not been published in *EQMM* are available from Crippen & Landru Publishers. †

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Marie smiled faintly. "I knew you'd say that, Miss Betty," she said. "All the same, I wish you had taken my advice and not sent him the usual warning. That will put him on his guard, and Scotland Yard on the alert."

Betty sighed. "It was a pity," she said, "but it couldn't be helped. Before I took this thing on I made up my mind that each man should have his fair warning, so that if he contributed to the Wellside Fund without pressure I should not subject him to force. So, you see, I had to send the warning to him, Marie."

The other girl frowned, and her dark eyes were rebellious.

"You've played too fair with them all along," she said, "risking your life, to say nothing of your happiness. What about Mr. Kempis, Miss Betty?"

For a moment the other girl turned her face away.

"Don't talk about him, Marie," she said softly. "I can't bear it. That's the one thing that makes me waver in my plan. But I mustn't let it influence me. I have sworn to make Luke Drayton pay, and pay he shall."

Marie shrugged her shoulders.

"How are you going to tackle him? How are you going to evade the police surrounding his house and office?"

Betty hesitated for a moment. Then she got up and paced up and down the room with a slow, purposeful stride.

"Marie," she began slowly, "you think I've been wasting my time these last three weeks, don't you? Running around to parties with people I didn't much care for, cultivating the sort of people who are not usually considered desirable?"

Marie reddened. "Well, I did wonder what you were up to," she said.

"I'll tell you." Betty dropped down into a chair and leant forward, an earnest expression upon her beautiful face. "I've been making enquiries—all sorts of enquiries—in most unlikely places about this man, Luke Drayton. You see, I saw from the very beginning that the person to protect me from the police in his case was Drayton himself, and I knew that that was only possible if he was protecting himself at the same time.

"I'll explain," she went on as Marie looked mystified. "I had suspected for some time that Luke Drayton had a secret, and I was right. Do you know who he is, Marie? He is the most important 'fence' in all Europe. That is to say, he's a receiver of stolen goods, and I've discovered how he does it. He keeps his

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own house and business entirely free from visitors who might be recognised by the police as suspicious characters, so he is allowed to go his own way entirely unsuspected.

"How he manages it is this," she went on, lowering her voice. "He flies to France and back every now and again. He does not use the many aerodromes on the east coast. He goes in disguise, spends an hour or so in a little village inland from Boulogne, where he meets his 'clients,' and the deal is made. He pays for the stolen jewels—they are nearly always diamonds—in English gold, which he takes with him. You can always get gold at the banks, you know, if you demand it. Then he flies back again with the jewels which he has bought, and no one is any the wiser."

Marie gasped. "But, Miss Betty," she said, "how did you discover all this?"

Betty smiled enigmatically. "It would take too long to tell, Marie," she said. "I've been working hard. I'm playing a risky game, Marie, but I'm not afraid, and something tells me I'm going to succeed."

Marie leant forward. "What are you going to do?"

For a moment Betty seemed to waver, making up her mind whether she was going to confide in Marie or not. Then she pointed to a copy of a French newspaper lying upon the couch.

"That paper is full of a daring robbery in a Paris flat. The Countess D'Oriole has lost a diamond necklace valued at—in English money—about fifty thousand pounds. And something tells me that those diamonds will find their way into Luke Drayton's possession. I had it upon valuable authority that Drayton drew out twenty-five thousand pounds worth of gold. It was an enormous sum, and there was a little gossip about it."

She hesitated and looked at Marie. "Do you see what I'm driving at? A fence usually pays the thieves half the value of the stolen goods. That is just about the sum he would need to buy the Countess's necklace. And it has occurred to me, Marie, that that money would be much better employed in the Wellside Fund than in paying the thieves who robbed the Countess. I suppose you realise that I got my pilot's certificate last week?"

Like a lot of society girls, Betty had taken up flying while the craze was at its height.

"Miss Betty," Marie began, "you're not—you're not—"

Betty laid a finger upon her lips. "I'm going to give Scotland Yard a run for their money," she said softly.

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In the Small Hours

It was a little after midnight when a small blue sports car pulled up at the crossroads a mile away from Luke Drayton's country mansion. A slender figure in a leather flying suit climbed out and stood for some moments by the car, her ears strained. It was Betty.

She knew exactly how great a risk she ran doing the errand herself. Scotland Yard knew that Luke Drayton had received the warning of the Red Rose, and were, therefore, on the *qui vive*.

Far in the distance she could just hear the throbbing of a motorcycle engine. Her spirits rose. She dimmed her lights, and stood back in the shadow of the hedge. Presently the motorcycle appeared, its headlight throwing up the crossroads in a sudden glare. The rider dismounted and stood for some seconds as though peering at the signpost, and then he whistled softly three times. Betty answered the whistle and stepped forward. The man was her own chauffeur. Three weeks before she had "dismissed" him, and by the aid of Lady Derry's references he had obtained a post in Luke Drayton's household. He greeted her eagerly.

"You were right, Miss Betty," he said in a hoarse whisper, "dead right. He's making arrangements to fly to France early tomorrow morning. I was with him when he drove down and made the appointment with the pilot at the aerodrome here. He's going to set out as soon as it's light. That will be about three o'clock. I tell you, Miss Betty, I don't think you'll have a chance of tackling him before he leaves the ground. He's frightened to death of the Red Rose. The hall's half full of plainclothes men, and he's got Mr. Kempis with him."

"They know he's flying early this morning?" said Betty quickly, doing her best to hide the shock which the man's last announcement had been to her.

"Of course. Why should he hide it from them? He says he's going to Manchester. He's a cool customer. He tells the police half the truth, and so there's no reason for them to suspect him. Mr. Kempis will probably drive down to the hangar with him."

Betty shuddered. Things were turning out worse than she imagined, but she still stuck doggedly to her game.

"Look here, Jim," she said, "I want you to drive down to the hangar and tell the shed mechanics and the pilot that Mr. Drayton has changed his mind and will not be travelling this morn-

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ing. There's no reason why they shouldn't believe you. The moment you're sure that they've taken your message seriously get on your motorbike and go back to the hall. When Mr. Drayton and Mr. Kempis are ready, bring them down to the common land two miles on the other side of the aerodrome. You can explain to them that the landing ground by the hangar is obstructed by an injured plane. I will be waiting on the common land in my new two-seater Moth. Mr. Kempis hasn't seen it yet, so there's no danger there. The registration marks aren't on it either, and I ought not to be using it really."

The man stared at her. "It's a terrible risk, Miss Betty," he murmured.

Betty shrugged her shoulders and strove to speak lightly. "I can't help that, Jim," she said. "I didn't dream that Mr. Kempis might be with Drayton. But we must hope for the best. What you've got to do is to hurry Drayton into the plane, swing the propeller, and get clear as fast as you can. I shan't stir from the cockpit, and he mustn't get a chance to make me talk. They'll only see my head and shoulders, and I shall have on big goggles and a helmet, while the light will be bad. There's every chance that we'll get away with it."

She held out her hand. "Goodbye, Jim. All the best—good luck."

The man took it eagerly. "You're a wonder," he said admiringly, "there's no mistake about that."

Then he climbed upon his motorcycle and rode off towards the aerodrome, while Betty returned to her car and sped off down the road to the private hangar where her own plane was awaiting her.

The Parachute Descent

It was a cold, grey dawn, barely light, when Tommy Kempis leant back in the car beside Luke Drayton and glanced curiously at his companion. Jim, the coat collar of his uniform turned up, sat outside the great limousine and drove carefully. So far everything had gone well. His employer had accepted the change of starting ground without demur, and the first stage in the adventure had begun.

Tommy, leaning back among the cushions, wondered idly to himself why the Red Rose always seemed to choose such pecu-

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liarly unpleasant specimens for her victims. No one in their wildest dreams could have called Luke Drayton a pleasant person. He was a stocky, middle-sized man with iron-grey hair and a peculiarly vindictive expression upon his hard, unprepossessing face. His eyes were narrow, and never seemed at rest.

He was very quiet, on his guard, but at the moment much more alarmed by the police amateur at his side than by the Red Rose, whose threatening letter had put him into such a panic that he had reported the matter to Scotland Yard.

Just now he was angry with himself for having called in the police at all. Of course, he had not known that his friends on the Continent would choose this particular week to pull off one of their most daring coups and so send him off on his delicate mission under the very nose of the police. However, he flattered himself that he was not even remotely suspected of anything but the most innocent of business journeys, and he was not particularly alarmed.

However, he was very glad to see a plane waiting for him on the broad strip of common, its silver wings glinting in the first rays of morning. He was in flying costume, and it was with some impatience that he permitted his chauffeur to strap him into his parachute. He was anxious to be off, particularly anxious for the Scotland Yard amateur not to have any word with the pilot, wherein he might discover the destination of the plane. He said goodbye somewhat hurriedly to Tommy, therefore, and almost ran over to the waiting aeroplane, while Jim darted forward to swing the propeller.

Tommy climbed leisurely out of the car. He could just see the pilot's head, goggled and helmeted, peering out of the cockpit of the machine. Just for a moment it struck him that there was something familiar in the shape of that head, and the way it was set upon the shoulders, but he had no opportunity to step forward and ascertain if the pilot was a stranger or not, for Drayton was already in the passenger cockpit behind the pilot, and the chauffeur had swung the propeller. With a roar the plane was off, taxiing over the short turf like some great unwieldy bird. He stood back and watched it as it rose slowly up into the air, mounting higher and higher until it was but a speck in the distance.

Once up in the early morning air, some of Betty's waning courage returned. She had never before experienced such a bad five minutes as she had done when she saw Tommy climb out

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of the limousine and saunter across the turf towards the plane. It was only her passenger's own guilty conscience which had saved her from exposure, she felt sure. She climbed higher and higher, until at a safe altitude she felt that the moment had come.

The only way of communicating in a small aeroplane is by passing notes backwards and forwards across the two cockpits. She turned slightly, and thrust an envelope at her passenger. He took it with some surprise and tore it open. The next moment every drain of colour had vanished from his face, and his thickly gloved hands shook. Out of the envelope had fallen a red rosebud. The note accompanying it was short but explicit.

"The reason for your journey is known to me. I know also that you have with you a large sum of money to pay for the Countess D'Oriole's diamonds. There are two courses open to you. You will either make a parachute descent, leaving the money in the plane, whence it will be conveyed to the Wellside Fund, or I shall make a descent myself, leaving you and the machine to crash. To prevent your escaping by parachute, it would be my regrettable duty to shoot you first. Any attempt to attack me will result in us both going to perdition together. Take my advice and choose the former course. It is really the only thing you can do. You had your chance to subscribe to the Wellside Fund, and you disdained it. This is your last chance. I give you five minutes."

The paper fluttered out of the fence's nerveless fingers. He tried to shout but the noise of the engine drowned his voice. He dared not touch the figure in front of him lest, as the Red Rose had predicted, they would both crash together. Far below, the countryside spread out like a green and yellow patchwork quilt. He felt sick, terrified. But he was an obstinate man, and would not give up his money lightly. He seemed to shrink down further into the cockpit. Near his feet he could feel the suitcase which contained his money. He carried no revolver himself, or, he felt, he might have made a stand.

Betty waited for five minutes, and then very deliberately she set the controls and began to climb to her feet. The parachute strapped to her seemed to fix the man's attention. He tried to struggle forward. Betty turned, and drew something small and gleaming from her overalls.

Drayton, who had caused untold suffering in his time without turning a hair, screamed. He signalled to her feverishly, and scrambled up in his place. The plane rocked dangerously. Grip-

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ping the ring of his parachute, he threw one leg over the side and jumped. Betty just had time to regain her seat and steady the machine. Far below her she caught a glimpse of the parachute, open, gliding slowly to earth, Drayton hanging like a stone beneath it.

The girl turned the nose of the machine and raced back for London and her private hangar. Her plane was like thousands of others; Jim would have made his escape; the Red Rose had performed her last coup, and no one was to know that Miss Betty Connolly had not simply taken it into her head to take an early-morning spin in her new machine. Besides, all things considered, it was hardly likely that Drayton would care to raise too many questions about the twenty-five thousand pounds in gold which he had been forced to contribute to the upkeep of the town he had ruined.

The Last of the Red Rose

The Hon. Tommy Kempis sank back into the little silk-covered armchair in Betty's boudoir and looked at the girl in front of him. It was eleven o'clock in the morning, but there was no sign of weariness on Betty's young face, no hint of the adventures of the small hours. She looked cool and charming in a sleeveless frock of almond-green silk, her dark hair bound low at the nape of her neck.

Tommy, on the other hand, appeared to be unusually dejected.

"Betty," he said, "I'm giving up my amateur sleuthing. I haven't got the temperament. And not only am I not successful, but I can't get up any sympathy for my elusive crook's victims. Why don't you marry me, and we'll go off on a glorious honeymoon somewhere where the Red Rose has never been heard of?"

Betty looked at him wistfully, but she did not answer, and presently he rose to his feet and came toward her.

"My dear," he said, looking down at her, "I wish you'd take me seriously. I admit I'm not much good as a detective, but I'd make a wonderful husband."

Still she did not answer, and he, thinking that the subject embarrassed her, changed it hurriedly.

"D'you know why I've resigned from this Red Rose business?" he said. "Because I'm licked—because we're all licked. The Red Rose is too clever for us. At three o'clock this morning I saw

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Luke Drayton, the last person who received the Red Rose's warning, off to Manchester in an aeroplane. At half-past eight this morning he was discovered wandering about in a Kentish field ten miles from anywhere, and wild horses won't drag from him what happened. He seemed to have made his descent by parachute, and that was all he would tell us. We then discovered that the plane he went up in was not the one he chartered, and his chauffeur, who drove him to the mystery plane, has disappeared.

"The police are convinced that the Red Rose is at the bottom of it all, but they are powerless to act since Drayton won't make any charge. The Red Rose, whoever she is, has got some hold over him that's keeping him silent. I'm through with the Red Rose. Let her do what else she likes. I shan't be mixed up in the affair."

To his intense surprise, the girl took his hands in hers and looked up into his face.

"I've got to tell you, Tommy," she said, "I can't let you go on loving me without telling the truth. I am the Red Rose. Drayton was a receiver of stolen goods. There was twenty-five thousand pounds in gold in that aeroplane this morning, which he was taking over to buy the Countess D'Oriole's diamonds from the thieves who had stolen them. I made him jump out of the aeroplane, and the money is now on its way to the Wellside Fund. I do not think Drayton wants police assistance. They might prove dangerous friends."

Tommy was staring at her incredulously.

"You, Betty?" he said. "I can't believe it. It's absurd."

The girl shook her head. "It's true, Tommy, you've got to face it. Oh, my dear, let me tell you my side of the story, let me tell you why."

With her eyes on his and her lips trembling, she poured out her whole story of Wellside and of her oath. The young man listened gravely, his eyes fixed upon her face. At last her passionate recital came to an end.

The young man moved towards her, and before she realised what had happened his arms were about her and he was holding her close to him.

"Oh, Betty," he said, "my wonderful, brave little Betty! I understand—of course I do! You'll marry me now?"

Betty raised her lips to his. "Yes," she whispered. ●

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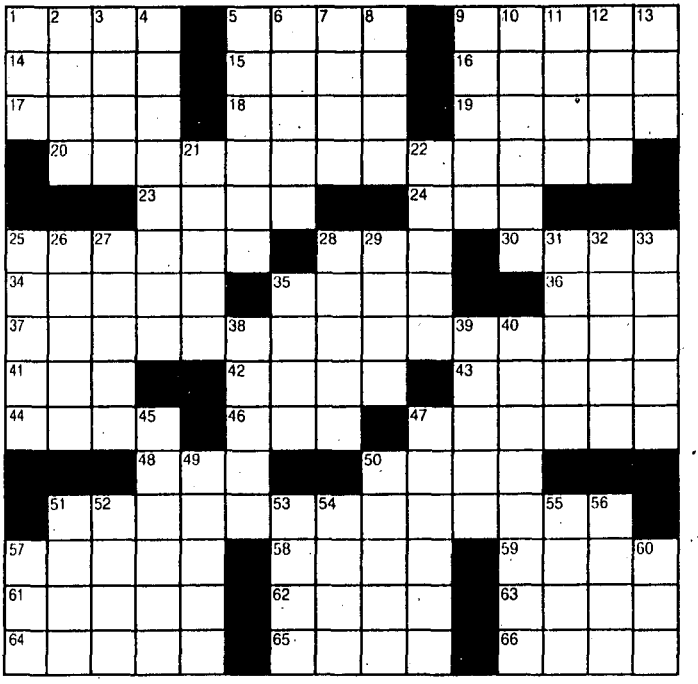
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

"... and Stormy Night"

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 85

ACROSS

1 It's a laugh
5 —— boy!
9 *Black —— Painted,* Ngaio Marsh
14 Soon
15 *The Man Who Was Taller —— God,* Harold Adams
16 Coronet
17 Diplomacy
18 Prong
19 Kind of beer
20 Is there light at the end? (Kenneth Millar, aka

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Ross Mcdonald)
23 Parched
24 Stinger
25 Maigret's cheese
28 To's partner
30 Indian prince
34 *Quoth the* ——, Jane Haddam
35 Space
36 Small quantity
37 Another way of looking? (Ruth Rendell as Barbara Vine)
41 *Dead* ——, Jane Detinger
42 —— *of Crime and Roses,* Kate Morgan
43 Huge
44 Art Deco illustrator
46 AMA members
47 Sunglasses
48 Superlative ending
50 *Grand* ——, Susan Moody
51 The other side? (John Dickson Carr)
57 Arnold's wife
58 Follows million
59 Mont.'s neighbor
61 Group of eight
62 ——*End,* Geoffrey Norman
63 S.S. Van ——
64 Popular tractor
65 Whirlpool
66 Actor Connery

DOWN

1 *The Roman* —— *Mystery,* Ellery Queen
2 Med. Sch. subj.
3 *EQMM* favorite Edward
4 Aardvark
5 Reach
6 Agatha Christie's *Girl*
7 Military vehicle
8 Dill herb
9 Make amends
10 *The Seventh* ——, Elizabeth Peters
11 Detest
12 Epochal
13 It rises in the spring
21 *A* —— *Before the War,* Dennis Lehane
22 WWI vessel
25 Raisin formerly
26 Locating device
27 —— garde
28 Skirmishes
29 Dems.'s opposites
31 *Date With* —— *Doctor,* Toni Brill
32 Late actress Mansfield
33 Encourages
35 Jewish month
38 Enlarge
39 Surrey city including Runnymede
40 Best friend?
45 Weirder
47 One of seven
49 Glide
50 Not a —— of evidence
51 Fish
52 Comedian Johnson
53 —— *to Black,* Robert Goldsborough
54 Bound
55 Garfield's sidekick
56 1880 novel by Zola
57 TV's *The* —— *Squad*
60 Barbie's beau

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Art by Fred Lynch

BREAKOUT FROM MISTLETOE FIVE

by James Powell

Mistletoe Five was quiet. Not a creature was stirring within its colossal walls. Yet the elf night watchman down by the guardhouse felt uneasy. Every fiber of his eleven-inch frame told him something was very wrong.

This nagging apprehension had begun a half an hour before when the large box truck arrived with the traditional load of stocking-stuffer things for the inmates. The driver sitting at the hand controls in the special seat elves used when operating Santa-sized vehicles was an old friend. They waved as the truck lumbered through the gate in the twelve-foot-high chain-link fence and started up the driveway. When he'd pulled the razor-

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wire barrier back in place and closed the gate, the night watchman started into the guardhouse. Then he stopped, looked back up at Mistletoe Five, and frowned. Something was missing. Something was very wrong. He stroked his narrow gray beard thoughtfully while overhead, beyond the Plexiglas dome that housed the vast North Pole complex, Polaris stood fast, swinging the other stars around it.

Now, as the truck emerged from the darkness around the building and started back down the driveway, the night watchman suddenly realized what was bothering him. It was the quiet. The inmates of Mistletoe Five were always restless and full of hoot and holler on Christmas Eve. It was like full moon to them.

We've recently learned that one of the three Christmas stories James Powell wrote for *EQMM* in 1994, "Midnight at Manger's Bird and Beast," has won a nomination for the Canadian Crime Writers Association's Arthur Ellis Award for Best Short Story. This year we have a single Christmas offering from the Canadian-born humorist. It's a satirical return to characters and background he used in an earlier *EQMM* story, "The Plot Against Santa Claus" (1/71). Congratulations to Mr. Powell on his well-deserved nomination for 1994!

Now something else made him scratch a pointed ear in wonder. Wasn't the truck coming too fast? Didn't it mean to stop for inspection? As he stared, wide-eyed, the speeding truck plowed through the razor-wire barrier, blowing tires as it came. The last thing the night watchman would ever see was the chain-link gate crashing down on him.

In a spray of sparks from its wheel rims the box truck plowed out across the broad boulevard and slammed to a hard stop against the high median strip. The rear door flew open and out poured a crowd of fat men with white beards and red suits. If their cheeks were sallow apples, each eye burned with the reflected light of the same mad bonfire. They milled about ho-hoing at each other and gesturing crazily. Then, with alarms soundi.. g all around them, they exchanged high-fives and rushed

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off in both directions down the Santa-sized boulevard.

Now from the cab of the truck stepped another santa, one with eyebrows of a malign slant above a hard, cool gaze. His bearing was calm and deliberate. He moved like a king among santas. In fact, the inmates of Mistletoe Five acknowledged him as their leader. His name was Slow-Ho. While he stood watching his companions go, two elf orderlies came rushing up, dragging a large net between them, bent on recapturing at least this one santa or know the reason why. But their target stepped forward to meet them and, with a surprising speed and lightness of foot, snatched up an elf left ankle in each fist. Twirling them like Indian clubs, Slow-Ho smashed their heads together and tossed the dead bodies over his shoulder.

Now Slow-Ho crossed the boulevard and entered the dark warren of the warehouse district, elf streets so narrow he often had to walk sideways. When he reached the old Elf Air zeppelin hangar, he crouched down on his haunches inside to wait.

As much as the elves fostered the myth of one Santa who lived forever, before Prozac and the other antidepressant drugs the average santa only had three good years on the job before, as the saying went, the "ho" started to slip. The elves prided themselves on their retirement package for santas and their spouses. Mistletoe Retirement Village was a complete facility, from the neat little bungalows of Mistletoe One to the constant-care facilities of Mistletoe Four. And for those santas whose minds snapped under the stress of abiding jollity, there was Mistletoe Five. Elf psychiatry diagnosed santa madness by a further deterioration of the "ho" into an unbalanced little hee-hee-hee, a dirty heh-heh-heh, or Slow-Ho's own ponderous laugh, which sounded like the downward progress of a round black bomb, wick asputter, dropping step by step toward innocent children at play.

The distant whelp of fire engines told Slow-Ho the santa arsonists had done their work. Minutes later came the two explosions from the direction of the Candy-Cane Foundry and he knew both great vats, the red and white, had been sent cascading in a sweet, molten gush into the critical Gumball Village crossroads. Still Slow-Ho remained crouched in the zeppelin hangar. At last he felt the icy rush of air which meant the mad santas had opened the outside gates to the North Pole complex, letting in the polar bears, who fed on the garbage dump at the

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entrance. Only then, sure the elves had their hands full elsewhere, did Slow-Ho leave his hiding place. He walked quickly, sirens screaming all around him, ducking into the darkness when he heard the rush of tiny feet as elves hurried by with grappling hooks and scaling ladders. Once a giggling santa stumbled past with more elves on him than ticks on a hound dog, all struggling to drag him down so paramedics trundling a Santa-sized hypodermic needle on a gurney could do their work. Another time a company of Whippet Lancers dashed by on dogback in their bright uniforms, lance pennants fluttering, on their way to battle the intruding polar bears.

Slow-Ho pressed on until he reached Delvington, where elves burrowed deep underground digging for precious kriskringlite, elfdom's principal source of revenue, on which the world tinsel industry depended. Beyond Delvington was his destination, a brick livery stable with a large Plexiglas elevator shaft rising from its roof up to the Plexiglas dome. Slow-Ho slipped inside.

And there was Santa, the genuine article this time, who'd come, as he always did, to check everything in preparation for his trip later that evening. The intruder watched from the shadows as Santa, humming a bit of a Christmas carol, inspected the last piece of harness and hung it back on its peg. As Santa started toward the sleigh to give that pesky left front stabilizer another look, he thought something moved in the darkness. Puzzled, Santa stepped closer. Just then a reindeer uttered a warning bleat from its stall. (Was it Dancer? Was it Prancer? It certainly hadn't been that showboat Rudolph.) As the real Santa turned toward the sound, a red sleeve reached from the darkness and caught him around the neck from behind. "Ho," drawled Slow-Ho through clenched teeth as he strained to arch his back. "Ho," he repeated as the jolly old man's toes left the floor. "Ho," he said a third time as Santa's face reached purple and then drained to white. The malign intruder held Santa off the ground until he found the thick sheaf of papers in the dead man's pocket. Then Slow-Ho let the corpse fall.

Grim-jawed and tiny, Garth Hardnoggin, the director general of the Toy Works, sat astride the arm of Santa's chair at the big window of Elfcom Central and gazed across the burning city with astonished eyes.

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From the carpet below him his aide-de-camp, Captain Horatio Snoot of the Whippet Lancers, shouted up, "Sir, we've driven the polar bears back outside. And all the escapees have been recaptured. Except for Slow-Ho."

Hardnoggin took little comfort in that. Yes, he had to admit, it'd been a big mistake to put Slow-Ho in with the general population of Mistletoe Five in the first place. The man's dark charisma quickly transformed that jolly bedlam into a place of winks and nods, of dangerous silences, sinister whispers, and painted smiles. Once in the exercise yard Slow-Ho was overheard asking another santa, "But suppose it wasn't always the *good* who die young?" During a mad santa football game an eavesdropping elf linesman heard quarterback Slow-Ho haranguing his huddle, urging a preemptive strike to nip evil in the bud and make the world safe for good little boys and girls. But the elf authorities never took him seriously.

Another explosion shook Elfcom Central. Beautiful subaltern Kelly O'Bunion, she of the spritely ears, reported, "It's the transmission tower, sir."

A moment later Bottom Higginbottom, head of security, scampered into the room. His upturned face was wet with tears when he shouted, "Santa's dead. Strangled. And the sleigh's gone. And the Naughty list, too."

Hardnoggin turned white. "Listen up, elves," he announced in his loudest voice. "Looks like we've got a crazy renegade santa on the loose. We have to warn the world."

Sparks Thumbkin, the communications elf, shouted back, "No can do, chief. With the tower down, incoming's all I got."

"Let me lead a whippet patrol to the pay phone at Bird's Eye Point, sir," urged Captain Snoot. "Let Strategic Air Command blow Slow-Ho out of the air."

"You gallant young fool, even if you got through the polar bears, you'd never make it in time." Hardnoggin suspected the offer was meant to impress Subaltern O'Bunion. Still he called to Sparks, "How long to speed of sound?"

"One hour and thirty-three minutes, sir."

"Give me a visual," ordered Hardnoggin. The large screen over the communications console lit up with a display of North America. The sleigh's automatic tracking device showed its progress with a dotted line heading south from the Pole. Insane or not, Slow-Ho had remembered to warm up the reindeer slowly

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until he reached the speed of sound and could switch on the space-time capacitor. Early in the nineteenth century the same elf engineers who gave the world the seven league boots and the ruby slippers invented a clever arrangement of shoehorns and stopwatches to master the space-time continuum. Sleighs so equipped could carry Santa from place to place almost instantaneously, enabling him to deliver presents all over the world in a single night. Once Slow-Ho reached the speed of sound there'd be no stopping him.

"All right, Captain Snoot," agreed Hardnoggin, "you've got your patrol. You just might make it in time. Go. And ride like the wind." The Whippet Lancer officer saluted and hurried off in a clatter of tiny boots and spurs.

Hardnoggin now turned his attention to the casualty and damage reports. Even if they did succeed in blowing Slow-Ho out of the air, they'd still be without a Santa on Christmas Eve. It wasn't like back before Prozac, when the elves maintained a cadre of cadet santas to fill in at times like these. These apprentices studied Jocularity, Advanced Flues and Chimneys, Elf Economics, and Reindeer Management at North Pole Polytech. The senior classmen got hands-on experience every Christmas Eve helping Santa make his rounds, wearing fake beards and red outfits like the real thing except without the gold stripe on the sleeve. Hardnoggin shook his head. He'd cross the no-Santa bridge when and if he came to it.

While the local polar bears crowded the front entrance devouring the candy slag from the Gumball Village disaster the elf clean-up crews were dumping there, Captain Snoot's command set out from the postern gate at a gallop. But an hour later the patrol was engulfed by that terrible Arctic phenomenon, moon-dazzle, a blinding glare that can occur when dense night fog combines with the moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow to give a luster of midday to objects below. Fifteen minutes at a careful trot and Snoot smelled fish breath. More bad luck. They'd fallen in with a party of polar bears fresh from feeding at the ice's edge. Snoot led his lancers on, hoping the beasts would turn off another way, imagining he could see their black noses floating above him on all sides like raisins in a hideous bread pudding. At last, with time running out, he unslung his bugle and sounded the charge. Ignoring the surprised roars of the bears

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and the defiant curses of his brave men, he spurred his mount forward. Someone must survive to send the message.

Abruptly Snoot emerged from the moon-dazzle. There, a hundred yards straight ahead, stood the Bird's-Eye Point telephone booth. Halfway there his mount's valiant heart burst inside its chest and it fell. Snoot hit the ground running without a backward glance. He reached the phone booth and closed the glass door on the terrible snout of the first polar bear, Snoot jamming his back against the door to keep it shut as best he could. The quarter he'd carried in his mitten was hot from his flesh. Three minutes to speed of sound. There was still time. But when he looked up, Snoot discovered the naughty little Eskimo boys and girls had gotten there first. The phone had been torn off the wall, its cash box gaping open. Snoot had failed his mission. As the polar bears crowded against the glass walls to stare down at him with hungry, bloodshot eyes, Snoot drew his sword and threw the scabbard away. He paused one last time to picture in his mind Subaltern O'Bunion, she of the spritely ears. Then he gave a Whippet Lancer war cry and stepped away from the door.

"Ten seconds to speed of sound," said Sparks.

Sad-faced Garth Hardnoggin turned back to the video display to watch the slow line of dots become a streak of light which turned and shot like an arrow toward Vancouver on Canada's west coast. Hardnoggin sagged. Whatever Slow-Ho meant to do, nothing could stop him now.

As the streak moved back across the Rockies heading toward Calgary, Sparks picked up CBC Vancouver and a hysterical radio announcer shouting something about the defenestration of the city. Before Subaltern O'Bunion could reach for the Elfcom Central dictionary, the word became clear. Someone had hurled children's corpses from the windows of the city's high rises, townhouses, and humble cottages.

As Hardnoggin watched in horror, the streak of light moved toward Medicine Hat and Moose Jaw. Yes, Slow-Ho was going to go through Canada like a dose of salts, leaving a shambles of the naughty dead behind him. Now it was Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Toronto. "Two minutes a city?" said Hardnoggin with disbelief. "It used to take Santa five."

"I don't think he's stopping for the milk and cookies, sir," said Subaltern O'Bunion.

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Hardnoggin groaned. Yes, that had to be it. "Turn that radio off," he ordered when he could bear no more. The room sat in grim silence as the streak reached Halifax and turned southward toward New England and the first reindeer rest stop in Manhattan. So that was that, thought Hardnoggin. The elves were out of the Santa business. He hung his head, ashamed that such a tragic event had happened on his watch.

Elves had discovered early what humans have yet to learn, that it was better to give than to get. Over their hundreds of years of giving Christmas presents, elves had gone from mere will-o'-the-wisps to substantial creatures with ample progeny at their knee. (No, they had not, as some elf dreamers hoped, grown taller. But no one had ever promised that they would.) And trying to understand what children wanted kept elves young, although Hardnoggin had to admit the current generation had him baffled with this wearing baseball caps backwards. Did they all want to grow up to be catchers? Well, all that was behind him now.

No more Santa Claus? Others might laugh at the thought. But elves remembered the story of the goblins and their Pumpernickel Pig. Back in the Middle Ages, in bakeries deep underground, the goblins made pumpernickel loaves in the shape of a pig to leave on human doorsteps every Tantony Eve. Soon they prospered and could walk abroad in the daylight, enjoying the respect and gratitude of their human neighbors. (No, they did not, as some goblin dreamers hoped, become handsome. But no one had promised that they would.) Then one year a foul-up in quality control let through some ergot-infected flour. Those who ate that batch of bread hallucinated and, believing themselves to be aflame, ran through the streets and plunged from bridges. St. Anthony's fire, it came to be called. The next day when the goblins appeared, shyly expecting to be thanked, they were met with angry sticks and stones. Some say that on Tantony Eve the few ghostly goblin survivors still come together amid the bakery ruins to play songs about Pumpernickel Pig on their sad accordions. Well, move over goblins, thought Hardnoggin. You've got elf company.

Just then the silence of Elfcom Central was broken by a long, windy whistle.

* * *

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Other than his size, nothing about Rory Bigtoes made you think elf. His curly toes were hidden in thermal mukluks and instead of the green cap with the jaunty feather, his was black leather with fur-lined flaps that covered his pointed ears. Bigtoes worked the saw in the cold gloom until the next notched slab of ice fell down onto the wooden sawhorses. Then with mallet and chisel he sent cube after cube tumbling down the chute. Judging the hopper full, he went from the ice-making compartment to the drier cold of the freezer proper and his stool beside the electric circuit breaker on the wall. Somewhat reluctantly, Bigtoes opened his book. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* hadn't been quite what he expected when he chose it from the Elf Prisoners' Aid Society lending library.

Bigtoes was the sole inhabitant of the only remaining penal refrigerator-freezer in elfdom's Department of Corrections. (Since his conviction, elf psychiatry had come under the influence of Hans von Earwig, author of *The Elf and the Abyss* and *Shortness and the Modern World,* who taught that criminal behavior should be dealt with not by imprisonment but by having the individual confront his size and rise above it.) Some elves called the place the "cooler," others the "clink," although technically that only applied to the ice maker. It was Bigtoes's job to throw the switch and turn on the light every time anyone opened the refrigerator door. And in between, he was expected to keep the ice hopper filled.

Bigtoes had once been chief of Santa security until he'd had a Santa murdered right out from under him. The Manhattan relay station was a boarded-up construction site on the lower West Side where the santa cadets watered and fed the reindeer and loaded on a fresh supply of toys hidden under tarpaulins camouflaged to resemble construction rubble. One Christmas Eve a cadet, an upper classman next in line to succeed the santa of the moment, knifed the jolly old guy, stole the money belt he carried to help out needy parents as he made his rounds, lied his way past Bigtoes's elves guarding the perimeter, and was never seen again.

Reprimanded by an elf board of inquiry, Bigtoes resigned and started working on the bee wine pretty hard. Next came morning glory seeds and the lure of the dark, forbidden passageways beneath the North Pole where the psychedelic mushrooms glowed. When he finally hit bottom, he found he owed a lot of

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money and his IOU's were in the hands of the shadow elves.

Each August pontoon planes landed close to the North Pole complex bringing canny-eyed human traders from below the tree line, and Thawville, a rough community of tents and wooden booths, would spring up, where shameless elves could barter pilfered kriskringlite for elevator shoes, little porkpie hats, mambo cassettes, tattoos, and clumsy ear jobs. The planes also brought the shadow elves, wispy creatures who, years before, had flocked down to Hollywood to answer a casting call for an aborted movie called *King Kong and Selected Short Subjects*. Embittered by the failure of their dreams, some of these elves decided to get rather than give and became paid agents of human parents who wanted their children's names removed from the "Naughty" list. The shadow elves cast their net for Bigtoes because he still had friends among the elf brass. But on his first, reluctant attempt to work off his debt Bigtoes was caught in one of Hardnoggin's crackdowns on green-collar crime and sentenced to fifteen years at hard labor for racketeering.

Bigtoes looked at his wrist watch. It was time. He marked his place in the book. Then he left the freezer by way of an elfhole cleverly disguised as a refrigerator magnet and clambered down to the floor on a knotted cord. He hurried through the sleeping townhouse. In the first-floor study behind a secret panel was what looked like the nickel-plated mouthpiece of a human-sized tuba. Taking a deep breath, Bigtoes blew into it through cupped hands. As he waited with his ear to the mouthpiece, he imagined his breath journeying through the hailing tube along the bottom of the Hudson River and up the Erie Canal to Oswego, New York, and from there beneath Lake Ontario on the roof of the old forgotten tunnel which once carried the Underground Railroad to freedom. From the Canadian shore the tube followed old railway lines up into the Precambrian Shield before striking off on its own over the permafrost and then by floating trestles across the Arctic Sea. This hailing tube, another example of elf engineering, dated back to 1876, when the second-checking of the "Naughty" list in the New York City area was put in the hands of Theodore Roosevelt, then Commissioner of Police. In those first days the "Ahoy, Santas" and "Ahoy, Teddy" came thick and fast. In fact, when the santa of the moment died, Roosevelt wanted the job, "the bulliest bully pulpit of them all," as he called it. But the elf council of elders frowned on santas

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with eyeglasses. Roosevelt had to be satisfied with his party's vice-presidential nomination.

Today the hailing tube was only used on Christmas Eve for Bigtoes's reporting in. When the Elfcom Central duty elf responded to the whistle, Bigtoes would identify himself. "Message received and recorded, Prisoner Bigtoes," would come the bored reply. And Bigtoes would return to his place of lonely confinement for another year. But sometimes he would catch a snatch of clog dancing or an elf glee or tiny office-party laughter, for the whole North Pole celebrated Santa's Christmas Eve departure. Bigtoes loved those sounds, however fleeting, for, like all elves, he had a gregarious nature.

But tonight he heard no music, no revelry, only dead silence until Garth Hardnoggin's desperate voice came on the line. "Ahoy, Bigtoes. We'd forgotten all about you. Listen carefully. You're our only hope."

Wall Street stockbroker Dudley Warbucks possessed a dark secret he and his wife Fidelity called his "Christmas affliction," because they first became aware of it during their December honeymoon in the Grand Caymans. Until then the sober-sided Warbucks felt nothing over the holidays but the merest ticlike upturn to his thin lips now and then and the ghost of a regret that he didn't tip more. But that Caribbean Christmas Eve, when he went into the master bathroom of their beachside cabana to dress for dinner, he discovered his hair had turned stark white, his eyebrows bushy, and, although he'd shaved that morning, the beginning of a white beard had sprouted on his face and was growing fast. If that weren't enough, he had a noticeable twinkle in his eye, and when he laughed his stomach shook like a bowlful of jelly. Laughed? Jelly? Warbucks rushed in terror to show his wife. "Fiddy, honey," he begged, "you've got to help me. There's more. I've got this crazy urge to give things away." As he spoke, his frantic fingers reached for his wallet on the bedside table. Sizing up the situation, Fidelity Warbucks coolly sucker-punched her husband a good one, dragged him back into the bathroom, and locked the door. An hour later Warbucks regained consciousness in a full beard and spent the night at the little bathroom window howling "Merry Christmas!" at the moon and throwing out toilet paper and tiny bars of hotel soap as gifts to the night. By next morning the fit had passed,

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his hair darkening, his belly solid, and the desire to laugh and give things away only a distasteful memory. Two days later, clean-shaven and eyebrows trimmed, he was able, with his wife's help, to board the flight back to New York.

When the fit returned the following year, the Warbuckses were ready for it. Dudley bought a Santa outfit and contact lenses to hide the twinkle. He taught himself to bite the insides of his cheeks whenever he felt jollity or generosity creeping over him. So on Christmas Eve when broker friends dropped by to plan team strategy for the annual Wall Street–Madison Avenue football game, the Warbuckses could explain Dudley's appearance by saying he'd just come back from delivering presents to his nieces and nephews.

Later that night Warbucks would use his affliction to make a buck or two working the sidewalk with tripod, kettle, and hand bell. His "God bless you for remembering the afflicted!" touched a compassionate chord, and by the end of the evening he could count on pockets bulging with tens and twenties and his kettle filled with quarters.

On the cab ride home this particular snowy night, a taxi passed them sporting one of those plastic elf rear-bumper ornaments, except that this elf had a fur-lined leather helmet. Warbucks remembered wearing one just like that with the earflaps buckled over the top when he was a boy. Then Hollywood issued identical helmets to its Japaneze Zero pilots and suddenly such headgear turned treasonous.

These flashbacks to Warbucks's hardscrabble childhood were rare but always moved him. In fact, Warbucks remembered almost nothing of his life before a distant Christmas Eve when he stepped off the curb in a santa suit and was knocked down by a passing car. The driver, Wall Street tycoon Big Jim Callahan, rushed Warbucks to his personal physician. There were no injuries other than amnesia. "Young man," said Big Jim, "I owe you for erasing your past. And I'm a guy who doesn't like owing anybody anything. So I'll swap you your past for a golden future by teaching you the secret of the stock market."

At first Dudley Warbucks (Big Jim christened him "Warbucks" because defense industry stocks were big at the time, and "Dudley" for a touch of class) was sceptical of Callahan's guiding rule, buy low and sell high. But he tried it and, by harry, it worked.

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Funny he should be thinking of that now. Wasn't this the very same corner where Big Jim said the fateful accident occurred? Curious, Warbucks ordered the cabbie to stop. Paying him off with a double handful of quarters, Warbucks stepped out into the snow at the scene of his fortunate accident. As he stood on the curb with his kettle of quarters and his jacket stuffed with bank notes, looking at the boarded-up construction site, a man with a strangely familiar voice said, "Hi, Santa. Long time no see." When Warbucks looked up, the man hit him across the head with a two-by-four. (Years later, when the police finally arrested Too-Tall Terry Simmons and asked him why he hung around that area mugging santas, Too-Tall said, "Because that's where the money is.")

Rory Bigtoes stood in the construction site in a pool of light shining from a street lamp beyond the fence. He stared skyward, sniffing the snowy air. His phone call to SAC hadn't worked out when they connected him with the only general in the Air Force who didn't believe in Santa Claus. So now how was he, a solitary elf, to stop a bad-ass santa before he killed again? During the Big Intrusion, when the president of Von Clauswitz Toys broke into the North Pole complex meaning to duke it out with Santa man-to-man, Bigtoes had climbed up the guy's pantleg and karate-chopped his kneecap until it broke like a biscuit. But not with these old hands. He needed a plan. Elfdom hung in the balance.

Riding over on the rear bumper, he considered waiting until Slow-Ho unharnessed the reindeer to feed and water them. Then he'd slip in under cover of darkness and start a stampede. But then he remembered how Rudolph's damn nose lit up everything like a Christmas tree. So, okay, there was only one way to stop Slow-Ho. But Bigtoes wasn't sure he could pull it off.

Then what to his wondering eyes should appear but a man in a santa outfit who came staggering in through a gap in the fence. Was it Slow-Ho? Before Bigtoes could back into the shadows, the new arrival spotted him. "Hey, Bigtoes," he smiled, like he and the elf went way back. Bigtoes blinked. Elves have trouble telling humans apart. "Hey," asked the man, "where'd Santa and the sleigh get to? And how'd I come by this headache?"

Bigtoes scrambled up a pile of sticks and coal so he wouldn't have to shout. "Mister, I got no time to play games," he said curtly. "Who the hell are you?"

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"Santa cadet Dudley Warbucks, sir," said the human, snapping to attention and laying his finger aside of his nose in the santa cadet salute. But when he saw how sucking in his stomach made it shake like a bowlful of jelly, he said, "Hey?" in a worried voice. "Hey," he repeated when he discovered his beard was attached to his face permanently.

Now Bigtoes understood. The guy was an alumnus of the long-disbanded santa apprentice program. "Keep cool, Dudley," Bigtoes reassured him. "Back in the North Pole Polytech cafeteria they put chemicals into the mashed potatoes to promote a proper belly and beard later down the road. Looks like the formula's starting to kick in. But we've got bigger fish to fry, you and I." With one eye skyward, Bigtoes quickly brought the astonished Warbucks up to speed on the situation and explained his plan. "Dudley," he said, "remember how naughty neighborhood kids were always stealing capacitors from the sleigh thinking they were car radios? Well, that's my plan. You're job is to distract Slow-Ho. Stall him. Keep him talking. I'll work as fast as I can. But, hey, if you get a chance to hit him with a rock or something, take it." Bigtoes sniffed the air. "I smell reindeer," he said and jumped down into the shadows.

Hoof clatter and silver bells announced Slow-Ho's arrival. Leaping from the sleigh, the malign santa came face-to-face with Warbucks. The red suits and white beards stared at each other and in one voice said, "Hey, I know you."

Meanwhile Bigtoes slipped around the sleigh to where the running-board toolbox was. Using both hands, he lifted the Phillips screwdriver up onto the floor below the driver's bench. Then he hoisted himself after it.

"You were right behind me at good old North Pole Polytech," said Warbucks. "Gimme an 'N.' Gimme an 'O' . . ."

Slow-Ho interrupted him. "You want to reminisce? Then try this on for size. I almost murdered you back then."

This revelation made Bigtoes freeze in the darkness.

"But why?" demanded Warbucks.

Slow-Ho collected the nine little feed bags from the back of the sleigh. "It would've made me next in line to succeed the jolly old guy. And I needed to be Santa real bad." Slow-Ho handed four of the bags to Warbucks and nodded at the reindeer. "Lend a hand and I'll tell you the whole story."

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While they fed the team Slow-Ho continued, "I had this vision of virtue riding roughshod over vice for a change. That meant a santa in charge who had what it takes to do what has to be done. No more Mr. Santa Nice Guy. No more rewarding naughty little boys and girls with sticks and coal. How about coffins instead? What do you think of that? Imagine a whole generation of good little boys and girls growing up uncorrupted by their naughty siblings' bad example. One generation would be all we'd need. Vice would wither. Virtue would reign ever after."

"But whole political parties could vanish," protested Warbucks. "Entire professions. A world without snake-oil salesmen, bamboozlers, guys and gals on the hustle."

Slow-Ho shrugged. "Don't make me cry." As they led the reindeer to the watering trough he continued his story. "So anyway, that Christmas Eve in Manhattan when Santa sent you out to buy him a hot buttered rum from the little bar around the corner, me and my knife trotted along, too. But then this real tall guy steps out of the shadows, grabs the money belt, and mugs you. As I watched you stagger out into traffic and get hit by a Jag I got this brainstorm: Go back and kill the jolly old guy. They'll blame you. And yours truly'll move up to be Santa. Well, I lay low about my vision for a year or two. Elves get mamby-pamby when it comes to killing kids. But I figured I could talk them around to it if I was jolly enough. But I couldn't keep my 'ho' up to speed. Next thing I knew I was in Mistletoe Five."

Meanwhile Bigtoes had discovered the new capacitors were welded to the dashboard to thwart neighborhood thieves. In his desperate try to pry the damn things loose the screwdriver slipped from his arms. Slow-Ho turned toward the sound. When he looked back at Warbucks his eyes had more craft than the Henley Regatta.

Hoping to distract him, Warbucks asked, "So, apart from this vision thing of yours, how the heck you been?"

But Slow-Ho ignored the question and strode toward the sleigh. As he watched Slow-Ho come, Bigtoes saw Warbucks falling back in a frantic search for something to hit the man with. To give him more time, the elf swaggered from the darkness of the sleigh. "Give it up, Slow-Ho," he shouted through cupped hands. "I heard everything."

With cat quickness Slow-Ho snatched him up in one hand, chucked him under the chin with the other hand, and crooned, "What an itty-bitty snookums we dot here."

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Bigtoes's cheeks burned with anger and humiliation. Baby talk is fighting words to elves. And you don't call them "snookums" unless you're looking for trouble. "The name's Bigtoes, Rory Bigtoes," he insisted, as he struggled to break from the tight cocoon of fingers.

Smiling darkly, Slow-Ho used his free hand to fasten the flaps on Bigtoes's leather helmet under his chin. "No, your name's Pigskin," he insisted, wheeling around to face Warbucks, who was charging down on him with a length of lead pipe. Cocking back his arm, Slow-Ho sent Bigtoes in a long, high throw over his attacker's head. The old santa cadet dropped the pipe and reversed direction, fading back with raised arms to save the spiraling elf.

Lofting up into the snowy sky to the sound of Slow-Ho's lugubrious laughter, Bigtoes had a moment to recall his oafhood dream of one day playing in the Pixie Bowl. As thousands cheered, his run, pass, or block would save the day for the Elf Arrowheads, battling their traditional rivals the leprechauns' Fighting Irish. But he'd never expected to be the football. As he began his descent he saw Warbucks below him but a good three strides back. Bigtoes closed his eyes, resigned to his fate. It was bad enough being the football. Did it have to be an incomplete pass?

But Warbucks made a last-minute dive and, hurling himself forward at full length, he juggled the elf on his outstretched fingertips, then caught and tucked him under his arm before crashing down headfirst onto a camouflaged stack of wooden sleds, part of the cache of Christmas toys. The impact stunned them both.

Bigtoes crawled from the arm tuck, groggy and shaking his head. He heard Slow-Ho whistle and shout and call the reindeer by name, "Now, Dasher! Now, Dancer! Now, Prancer and Vixen! On, Comet! On, Cupid! On, Donder and Blitzen! You, Rudolph!" Bigtoes watched the sleigh mount into the night. Nothing could stop Slow-Ho now.

Until something did. A shudder like a mighty hiccup shook the sleigh, which began to yaw from side to side and buck crazily. To Bigtoes it looked like the left front stabilizer had malfunctioned. But that was crazy. Santa always checked that. Hell, he checked it twice. He checked everything twice. Slow-Ho struggled with the reins, fighting for control. Abruptly the sleigh slid

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off into a tailspin and slammed to earth back inside the construction site. The space-time capacitor exploded in a shower of tiny shoehorns and stopwatches. All that survived the flames was a small ball of red light that arced from the wreckage. Bigtoes jumped up and caught it in both hands on its third crazy bounce. As he held the ball between his palms the light flickered and went out.

Well, he'd never cared much for Rudolph anyway.

Warbucks struggled to his feet and stood watching the wreckage burn. Then he turned to Bigtoes and nodded at the ball. "What the hell's that?" he demanded.

Bigtoes dribbled Rudolph's nose a couple of times before passing it up to the santa cadet. "Something for the Reindeer Museum," he shouted. Then he turned and sniffed the air. "I smell barnyard."

At his words, a battered old sleigh pulled by seven spavined and swayback reindeer materialized out of the darkness with a grim-looking Garth Hardnoggin in the driver's bench. As the director general surveyed the scene, Bigtoes brought him up to date.

Hardnoggin gave a gratified nod and said, "I'd've been here sooner, but seven reindeer and a sleigh that's been sitting out in the weather behind the pigsties for twenty years don't get you to the speed of sound real fast. All right, let's get going. We've got a big night ahead of us."

Leaving Bigtoes to use the tractor beam on the old sleigh's capacitor to load on the toys, the director general took Warbucks aside and said, "I guess we can make the case that you are the rightful heir to the Candy-Cane Throne, Mr. Warbucks. So my question is this, do you want the job? Understand, you'd have to start tonight."

Warbucks gave the elf's tiny hand a vigorous shake. "I'm your man, Garth. Now that I've got my past back I kind of like it."

"And you'll be expected to relocate. Is there a Mrs. Warbucks?"

Warbucks nodded. "Mrs. Claus will be a real stretch for Fidelity. But I think she'll go along with it." He rubbed his chin where she'd sucker-punched him. "She's one gutsy lady."

The toy loading was complete. Warbucks stepped up onto the driver's bench and took the reins. As the two elves strapped themselves in beside him, Warbucks asked, "Hey, shouldn't we

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backtrack and give the good little Canadian boys and girls their presents?"

"Better we give them something extra next year," suggested Hardnoggin. "Right now nobody in a red outfit's safe north of the Forty-ninth Parallel. The parents of the naughty dead are so steamed I hear they're chasing Mounties up trees."

"Well, okay then, here goes nothing," announced Warbucks. But when he opened his mouth to call the seven reindeer he realized he didn't know their names. Hardnoggin took a clipboard from the glove compartment and passed it to Bigtoes. The elf ex-convict read the new shout of reindeer names. As he passed the clipboard on, Bigtoes gave Hardnoggin a quizzical eye.

"We got to go with what we've got," explained the director general.

Warbucks took a deep breath and read the reindeer shout at the top of his voice. "Now, Sleepy! Now, Grumpy! Now, Doc and Sneezy! On, Sleepy! On, Happy! On, Dopey and Bashful! Yo, Sleepy!"

And some heard him exclaim as they drove out of sight, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!" ●

Solution To The Mystery Crossword

H	A	H	A	■	A	T	T	A	■	A	S	H	E	S
A	N	O	N	■	T	H	A	N	■	T	I	A	R	A
T	A	C	T	■	T	I	N	E	■	O	N	T	A	P
■	T	H	E	D	A	R	K	T	U	N	N	E	L	■
■	■	■	A	R	I	D	■	■	B	E	E	■	■	■
G	R	A	T	I	N	■	F	R	O	■	R	A	J	A
R	A	V	E	N	■	A	R	E	A	■	■	D	A	B
A	D	A	R	K	A	D	A	P	T	E	D	E	Y	E
P	A	N	■	■	D	A	Y	S	■	G	I	A	N	T
E	R	T	E	■	D	R	S	■	S	H	A	D	E	S
■	■	■	E	S	T	■	■	S	L	A	M	■	■	■
■	D	A	R	K	O	F	T	H	E	M	O	O	N	■
M	A	R	I	A	■	A	I	R	E	■	N	D	A	K
O	C	T	E	T	■	D	E	E	P	■	D	I	N	E
D	E	E	R	E	■	E	D	D	Y	■	S	E	A	N

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LIZZIE'S LOVER

by Ruth Rendell

"The rain set early in tonight," she said.

She came into the house and he shut the door behind her. Her head had been uncovered and her long fair hair was wet. He smiled at her. "D'you know what you said?"

"I'm sorry?"

"The rain set early in tonight. That's the first line of 'Porphyria's Lover.'" He looked into her face for comprehension, saw none. "Browning. It's a poem, Lizzie. Did you never do it at school?"

He took her coat, which was very wet, and having thought better of his first idea, the hooks on the hall wall, draped it over the back of a chair. The house was small and low-ceilinged, a little brick house in a terrace in the far reaches of a South London suburb, unheard-of, far away from Underground stations and bus stops.

"Did you say Porphyria?" she said. "Porphyria's a disease, Michael. I don't know why it's called that, but it is. Your urine goes purple."

"Browning called the girl in his poem Porphyria before they named the disease. There's a sort of marble too called porphyry. It means purple. *Porphyra,* Greek, purple."

"The things you know," she said. "You've got a hair dryer, haven't you? I'd like to dry my hair."

Michael couldn't bear the noise. "The dryer broke and I threw it out," he lied. "I've lit a fire. We'll have some wine and you can dry your hair by the fire."

Some years ago, John Mortimer, writing in Britain's *Sunday Times,* said, "If it weren't for a ridiculous literary snobbery about 'crime writing,' Ruth Rendell would be acclaimed as one of our most important novelists . . ." Throughout the course of her career, Ruth Rendell has moved more and more into the mainstream of fiction, with stories and books that defy simple classification as crime stories.

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She was wearing a long skirt of a bluish-mauve colour with a dark purple top of velvet and a fine violet chiffon scarf. The hem of the skirt was wet. He thought how absurd it was that women who had emancipated themselves into trousers should revert back to what their great-grandmothers wore—and from choice. The fire was half-dead, a smouldering flameless mass. While he opened the wine, she knelt down and worked at the fire with the fancy brass bellows he had bought in a junk shop.

He recited softly, "'She shut the cold out and the storm, And kneeled and made the cheerless grate Blaze up, and all the cottage warm.' "

"Hardly that," she said and she laughed. "Is that more of Porphyria?"

"I was doing it with the kids in class today and now you seem to be acting it out. Here's your wine. She'd come to his house out of the rain, she had wet hair too, yellow hair, Browning says, which yours is, I suppose."

"Yellow? I don't like the sound of that. What's your poem about? I know you're dying to tell me."

He watched her dip her head down and spread out the hair in a wide golden fan. The firelight made the separate strands sparkle.

"I don't know the whole thing by heart," he said, "only bits. There's a feast in it, which reminds me I should start getting us some food. Or do you want to go out to eat?"

"I'm not hungry." She began passing a comb through her hair. It made an electric crackling. "Don't let's eat yet."

"All right then," he said. "Come and sit here beside me."

The little room had a sofa in it, covered with a piece of red and purple tapestry. Two table lamps had dark red shades and these he left on while turning out the central light. The room became cozy and at the same time seemed smaller. Michael sat on the sofa and patted the cushion next to him. When she was sitting beside him, he lifted one of her hands and laid his in it.

" 'She put my arm about her waist,' " he said. "That's right, put my arm round your waist. 'And made her smooth white shoulder bare.' " Gently he drew the purple velvet neckline down, exposing her upper arm. "Yours is more tanned than white. Victorian girls avoided the sun."

"A lot of people would say that was wise. Go on with the poem."

"I told you I can't remember it all. She makes him rest his cheek on her bare shoulder and then she spreads her hair 'o'er

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all,' meaning his face, one supposes."

"Like this?"

Lizzie laid her hair across his face and her shoulder like a veil. He shook himself and sat up because he disliked getting hairs in his mouth. "More wine?"

"Yes, please."

He refilled her glass and brought it back to her. When she made a move to pick it up he took hold of her hand, held it, and bringing his mouth to hers, kissed her lingeringly. He smoothed the long hair away from her face, undid the knot in the purple scarf, and kissed the hollow in her throat.

"Is that what the lover did with Porphyria?" she asked him softly.

"No, I don't believe he did. He didn't kiss her—not then. He was pleased because she'd come through wind and rain, and not so pleased because she wouldn't give herself to him forever."

"If that means sleep with him, Victorians didn't, did they?"

"I expect some did," said Michael. "Anyway, he says that 'passion sometimes would prevail,' and in fact it was passion which had driven her to him that night."

"Must have been the same thing with me," said Lizzie. "It took me nearly two hours to get here, what with the Victoria Line down and the buses all coming at once and then none for half an hour. Only passion kept me going."

" 'Be sure I looked up at her eyes,' " said Michael, " 'Happy and proud; at last I knew Porphyria worshipped me.' "

"Was she married? Like me?"

"Browning doesn't say. But he describes her as 'perfectly pure and good,' so one would suppose not. Unfaithful wives were criminals in his day."

Lizzie looked away and drank some of her wine. Then she held Michael's wrist and lightly stroked the palm of his hand. She said dreamily, "What happened next?"

"He strangled her."

She dropped his hand as if it burnt her and retreated into the corner of the sofa. *"What?"*

"He strangled her with her own hair. To keep her for himself. Forever. 'I found,' he says, 'A thing to do, and all her hair In one long yellow string I wound Three times her little throat around . . .' "

"And you do this poem with the kids at school?"

"They're sixteen, Lizzie. They're not babies."

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She edged back nearer to him. "It wouldn't work. You couldn't strangle someone with her own hair."

"Why not, if it was long enough?"

For answer she took hold of her own hair in one thick hank, golden and smooth, and held it out to him on her hand like someone offering an object for sale. He took the hair in both hands and twisted it once, drew it down past her right ear and across her throat. At first he wound it loosely, then, pulling it tighter, succeeded in making almost two circuits of her smooth brown neck.

" 'Her cheek once more,' " he said, " 'Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss.' "

"He kissed her on the *cheek?*" said Lizzie.

"With the Victorians I sometimes think that was a euphemism for mouth." Michael brought his to hers, but as he touched her skin he deflected his lips to where corner of mouth and cheek met. As he pressed his lips on the warm soft skin he took a firmer hold of her hair and gave a sharp tug.

"Michael!" It was almost a scream.

He was pulling on the skein of hair as hard as he could. Suddenly he released her. She pulled down her hair with both hands. "For God's sake!"

"You were right. It can't be done. Your hair's not long enough."

"Just as well. You frightened me for a moment."

"Did I?" he said. "Surely not."

With both hands he smoothed her hair back over her shoulders. He put his hand under her chin and lifted it. Her eyes were doubtful. He looked deep into them.

"It was a way of keeping her forever, wasn't it? No going back to the husband when the evening was over, no more pride or 'vainer ties' to dissever. I can understand that."

His hands were on her shoulders now and the eyes were mesmerising. Hers glazed over and her mouth trembled. He took hold of the two ends of the purple chiffon scarf, crossed them, and, in a hard swift movement, pulled them tight. She screamed but no sound came. Porphyria hadn't fought at all, but Lizzie fought, thrashing and kicking and flailing with her hands, choking and gasping. But when the struggles were over she too lay still, her head fallen into his lap.

He stroked the hair that hadn't been quite long enough. He quoted softly, " 'And thus we sit together now, And all night long we have not stirred, And yet God has not said a word!' "

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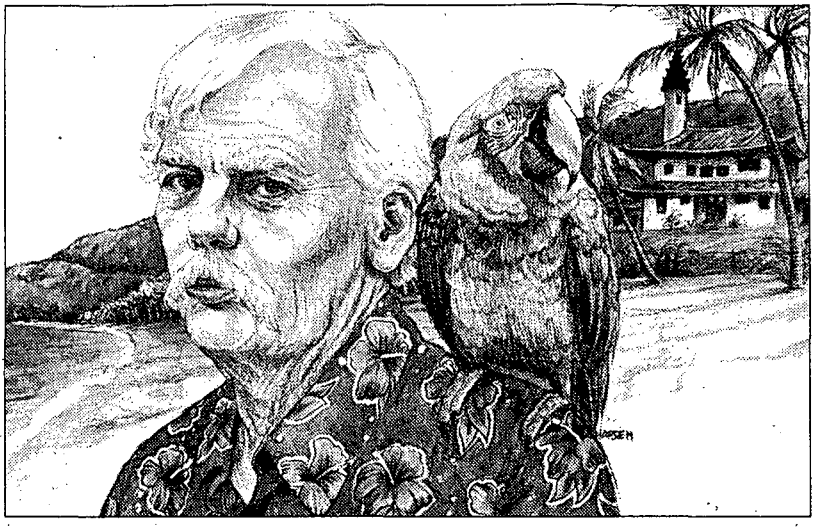

Art by Laurie Harden

HAPPY HERMITS

by Janwillem van de Wetering

Maybe I wouldn't have made Mister Calahan fall out of his canoe by banging my Tibetan cymbals and yelling Apache curses if it hadn't been Christmas. Christmas always irritates me. For one thing, my parents forgot to have me baptized, and for another, I don't care for loud festivities. I'm retired, I'll have you know. At the eve of life I'm claiming some rest and I've gone a long way to get it, right to the end of the Florida Keys, that graceful line of bridge-connected islands where palm trees sway and pelicans glide. I found myself this pirate's mansion on the shore of Egret Cove and live quietly with a large scraggly bird. Parrot feasts on nuts from the garden and I feast on seafood from the cove—snappers, groupers, broiled or boiled. For exercise I play polite basketball with Deputy Sheriff Wekko, another contented recluse of Egret Key. Wekko still has to work; he drives a patrol cruiser up and down the one and only highway here,

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U.S. 1. He makes up for dealing with bad humans by feeding friendly raccoons cat food. The raccoons live under his cabin-on-stilts on the other side of this small island. We have our differences; Wekko follows the path of voodoo and I'm more into Tantric spells, but all of us here on Egret Key are just one little bunch of happy hermits.

So where is the catch?

Don Pussiliano is the catch.

The don is a recluse too, after having been a Manhattan banker. He reluctantly admits to maybe having slipped a little—inside trading in *really* junky junk bonds—but after playing some good tennis in jail, the don cleared the gate with the remnants of a billion. Then what does Pussiliano do, this foreign-sports-car driver in flashy clothes under a fluffed and glazed hairdo, this complicated incarnate spirit suffering from assorted personality disorders? Of all the places in our vast country, once-almost-a-billionaire Pussiliano has to find Egret Key, buy up all remaining shorelands, and build himself a two-acre palace a stone's throw from Wekko's and my humble abodes.

What the don calls his "cottage" (and Wekko and I call "Donsville") is poured out of concrete and then plastered over to give it the fashionable "Baleares" look: rustic, each window artistically out of line in pastel-colored walls. So far so nice. Now cover this Mediterranean cuteness with a sloped "Himalayan-style" roof of multicolored tiles and *now* what are we looking at? Pizza on a turd? Well, yes, maybe Donsville did get to look like pizza-on-poop, so to distract a neighbor's critical eye Pussiliano throws in a brick terrace to support an African-style beach cabin: round with a straw conical top, like a teenage haircut. Is Donsville

Ever had an overdose of Christmas cheer? Then you won't soon forget "Happy Hermits" and Mr. van de Wetering's superb lampooning of holiday excess. Like Jannie, his series hero, Janwillem van de Wetering was born in Holland and spent some time in his youth in Japan studying Eastern religions. Unlike Jannie, he now lives in the frozen North (in Maine) where he's more likely to see bears than iridescent ibises. ¶

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looking any better now? Something missing maybe? Well, yes. As Pussiliano keeps hiring and firing architects, a designer with a Transylvanian accent and a Minsk (Czechoslovakia) University degree adds a "Dracula tower": marble-covered, gold-tipped, phallic.

Even Wekko, who likes towers, he lives in one himself, was appalled at what the Minsk Vampire Man created.

To finish things off, a redneck crew with chain saws cut down a fine grove of Australian pines that grew between Donsville and my house. From then onward I was exposed to Pussiliano's garish nightmare come true.

Okay, it's a free world. I can look the other way. Can I listen the other way too? When the Makaha Sons of Ni'ihau keep singing *He Ino No Kaiulani* for a couple of hours on end? As a musical backdrop behind call girls entertaining Don Pussiliano on the African-style beach terrace that, since the clear-cutting of my pine grove, I have a technicolor view of?

Listen, I love the Hawaiian Sons, but the don likes to put his Yamaguchi sound system on repeat, and the best music goes bad when the same disc keeps spinning.

The same goes for the best of nearby Key West's pick of young naked women. Will the beauties never drive their Mazda Miatas home to their escort club on Flagler Boulevard?

You don't have to ogle naked women, you say.

Yeah. Sure.

What, my highborn reader, do you think Buddha was doing under the Bodhi tree?

And do you think he liked it?

Maybe the don's interference with Wekko's and my peace of mind is a character exercise thought up by an unemployed god who has a problem with happy hermits.

How far can a god-tested hermit's head bow?

The god tried that out at Christmas.

I thought I had endured all when the holy season came around and Don Pussiliano began to explore his spiritual overdrive. The frenzy that his vast resources allow him to indulge in must be an attempt to relive carefree early days. Christmas, the don told me tearfully after knocking back more of the finest imported cognac—this was during the days we were still on speaking terms—remakes him into the happy toddler he was in the dreamtime in Little Italy, New York. Christmas lights and mu-

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sic bring back the memory of being hugged by voluptuous aunts.

Pussiliano certainly did his utmost to try and recreate those mammal moments.

Once-almost-a-billionaire desires to recreate a dream. America's efficient mail-order network delivers props promptly.

Christmas, all heaven to Don Pussiliano.

All hell to happy hermits Wekko and Jannie.

Never despair.

"You really think this is designed to get us beyond good and evil?" Wekko asked.

I told him the god planned it to improve Relaxed Attitude.

Sure.

Hermit theory reads easy; hermit practice hurts and makes us yell.

There is always the difference. Pussiliano dreamed of big-breasted Christmas aunts. Wekko nightmared of having to sing songs without rhythm in a religious home for leftover kids. As for me, a decorated pine tree reminds me of getting whacked over the head with squeaky radio songs, trying to play with malfunctioning toys, of cheek-squeezing Saint Nicks, of banishment to a rat-infested basement for inadvertently setting the *Tannenbaum* on fire.

My horrors returned when I watched my neighbor build his theme park. I shuddered when I saw Pussiliano decorate palm trees, Norway pines, sea grape trees, even giant cactuses with gaudy colored lights that switch on and off at random. I flinched when floodlights showed a stable filled with plastic folks, a placid donkey and bull, cheered by shepherds and bleated at by sheep, all, even the animals, true-size and frozen in exaggerated postures. Don Pussiliano even added the three magi on camels, who raced a fat, uniformed Master HoHoHo whipping reindeer that pulled a sleigh stacked with colored boxes. Plastic Christmas trees lined Don Pussiliano's floating dock, their flashing lights bobbing with the motion of the cove's waves.

So I was going to look the other way, but we were on the waterside here and Egret Cove acts like a mirror. The spectacle reflects for some considerable distance.

A blindfold?

Move about my property by ear?

What about sound pollution?

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Pussiliano replayed his one and only seasonal record: *Crescent City* by Wynton Marsalis. Strategically placed stereo speakers piped "Jingle Bells" from everywhere, a little loud but pure and pervasive.

Pure pervasive "Jingle Bells" forever.

Holy jazz on repeat. Here the high-quality compact disc comes round again. "Silent Night." *SILENT NIGHT!*

Earplugs?

I tried wads of cotton wool but it's hard to move about blindfolded and deaf-plugged. I tried to stay in bed but body needs kept me up and about, in spite of Mr. Marsalis's persuasive version of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen."

Marcus Roberts on piano. A fine and sensitive player indeed. When I heard "Winter Wonderland" the first twenty times, I was quietly moved. From then on I bit my lips so as not to cry loudly.

So when Pussiliano has his Christmas works going—from sunset to the early hours is the usual schedule,—I tend to become a wee bit cranky, as I was when Parrot thought he spotted a lobster robber early on the evening of December the twenty-third.

Egret Cove is a nature reserve, and I volunteered to be the sanctuary's keeper. I like doing good work to make up for a bad past.

Hear my confession: Yes, I used to, up in New England, convert wetlands into pricy house lots and make a bundle.

Spoil the North, save the South.

Here I am, feeding disabled pelicans. After boating about the bay taking care of the winged ones, I socialize with my fellow hermit. Deputy Sheriff Wekko is a black skinhead who lives in a pagoda that I helped him build from driftwood. Wekko's wife hated it; she left for the pleasures of Miami. My wife chose the pleasures of heaven; she left me Parrot, a large and scraggly bird. My deceased wife's deceased dog, large, loving, and loud, is still with me in voice, for Parrot, when alarmed, imitates Fido's barking. Parrot likes to ride my shoulder.

"WHAF WHAF!" Parrot barked into my ear.

Now what? We already have "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" on the super-stereos next-door, and now the loudest Floridian dog ever lives again on my shoulder?

I rushed into the house and grabbed my cymbals.

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My house once belonged to a British pirate operating out of the nearby Bahamas. The Royal Navy kept chasing him, so Captain Death moved to American shores. He brought his house with him, having his crew break the structure up and reassembling it after the voyage. Captain Death's sailors were talented artists.

One of their works of art is a board railing that lines the west side of my second floor. A design of silhouettes was jig-sawn into the boards, showing alternate unclad feminine shapes and fat stone jugs. The house is placed in such a way that the setting sun projects the rail design onto my bedroom's whitewashed walls. The slowly moving figures appear as shapely nude women pursuing alcoholic joys. Now that I portend to be a meditating and chanting enlightenment-bent hermit, I should have taken that heathen railing down, especially since it had weathered away a good deal, but I had Wekko help me restore the decoration instead.

I like to test myself.

We must respect the past. This house is a monument. This type of gingerbread artwork from the Victorian era is now exceedingly rare.

A good hermit should not shy away from temptation.

There were other rationalizations that slip my mind for the moment.

Captain Death's minions also built him stone seawalls and steps. Wekko and I feed the cove's wildlife from there. Seagulls and pelicans glide, fish jump, and lobsters crawl as we throw them leftover dinner. The stone steps, hollowed out from underneath by ever-recurring currents, are home to giant lobsters. Florida lobsters are rare now and consequently pricy. I guard a fortune's worth of fresh lobster tail here. Bad-ass poachers pass my shore in their dinghies and dories. I hear them salivate when they see my tasty crustaceans wave yard-long antennas.

Parrot keeps watch. As soon as his birdly radar notices an evil presence, he barks in my ear and I grab my genuine sorcery cymbals from the pre-Buddhist Bon monastery of Shing Lap Ch'a (I collect bizarre objects) and crash those big copper mothers together. Parrot, propelled up by the cymbals' thunderous clang, loses feathers while shrieking.

I shriek too. For lobster robbers I like to use Apache incantations. Apaches lived by raiding and invented special curses that

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would paralyze their opponents. I had an Apache girlfriend once. She was a good teacher.

The sudden cacophony is guaranteed to chase away lobster robbers.

Usually I first check who is boating near the stone steps, but with Pussiliano's Christmas Musical going on my patience was short.

CRASH, *shriek,* ziiiiiiingngngngng!

I expected the sound of swishing oars or of an outboard engine starting up but heard the splash of a body hitting water. There were shouts for help. I also heard gurgling and thrashing.

Since when do lobster robbers fall out of boats? Since when can lobster robbers not swim?

I remembered the current.

Now what had I done?

Was I endangering a Keys-supporting tourist?

Egret Cove connects with the Caribbean Sea through just one narrow channel between mangrove swamps. An immense body of water has to rush in and out twice each day, pushed and pulled by the tides. The current swishes by my dock with considerable power. Right then the tidal stream was outward, directed toward the dreaded empire of Cuba. If my victim couldn't swim, his next port of call might be Havana.

Parrot and I rushed to the dock. An expensive canoe was floating away rapidly from growing concentric circles that marked the spot where its owner went under.

I keep a small motorboat at my dock. Fortunately she started right up. Victim hadn't floated off too far; I saw his bubbles and grabbed him with the boat hook.

He responded nicely to life-restoring techniques.

I chased and caught the canoe too.

Back again on my dock, I stripped Victim of his bright yellow silk shorts and orange embroidered cowboy shirt. I wrapped him up in towels. He staggered into the house.

"Are you okay now, sir?"

Victim turned out to be a small middle-aged white male with a nose that got broken and fixed a few times. What hair he had was long. Rolex watch plus solid gold bangles.

I got him a beer while he waited for his clothes to come out of the dryer. He said he liked the pirate's mansion. I asked what

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he might have been doing in his expensive canoe in the dark in a dangerous channel.

Victim identified himself as Mr. Calahan, a birdwatcher from Chicago. He had been studying a large flock of iridescent ibises settling down for the night on the islets farther along the cove. It suddenly got dark (as it will in the tropics). He got lost. He was steering for my stone steps, looking for help, when I clashed my cymbals and shouted my curses. He fell out of the boat. He was glad I saved him. He wasn't glad that he had lost his waterproof bag with expensive contents.

"Have you seen my bag, my man?"

"No, sir."

The moon had come up. Mr. Calahan pointed at a pelican with one wing, paddling itself along to his islet. The invalid pelicans of Egret Cove Sanctuary sometimes forget they can't fly so they're often late coming back to the little mangrove islands farther along in the cove.

"*Will* you look at that iridescent ibis, my man?"

I nodded politely. We do have some pretty birds here.

"Iridescent ibises are so rare," Mr. Calahan said. "I heard there were still some left on this cove so I came out to look. Watching near-extinct birds makes me happy."

He told me about the islets where he had seen dozens of these nearly extinct birds.

Never, in my fifteen years on Egret Island, did I see an iridescent ibis here.

It's rude to argue with guests.

"Ibises, my man." Mr. Calahan sighed happily.

Well, what is it to me? Just the other day, in Key West, a tourist called my attention to wheeling turkey vultures, calling them herons.

"You must be the caretaker here, my man," Mr. Calahan said.

I said I certainly took a lot of care here.

He smiled at what he believed to be a simpleton's joke. "You're a conch, my man?"

Conchs are what people who are born on the Keys proudly call themselves. Conchs are sly. They get tourists to consider them to be simple-minded. Conchs make more money that way.

I said I would like to be a Conch but that I was Dutch-born.

"Worse!" Mr. Calahan laughed. He said he knew all about where the Dutch-born come from. Holland, right? Holland is,

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Mr. Calahan told me, where Dutch uncles (who like to fondle little girls) live. Dutch uncles talk double Dutch (ununderstandable gobbledegook). Dutch uncles take guests out on Dutch treats (guests pay their own tabs). The guests who pay their own tabs are known as "going Dutch" (meaning "going stupid").

Being even simpler than a Conch, I laughed heartily at this amusing information, told slowly by Mr. Calahan so that the Dutch wannabe-Conch caretaker might follow its subtle contents.

I couldn't blame Mr. Calahan though. It's the way I look. No more Brooks Brothers suits for me. I wear jeans now. I patch them myself, and I patch the patches. My suspenders are frayed. My faded linen work shirt doesn't get ironed much. I cut my sandals from a car tire found by the roadside. I don't comb my beard and I cut my own hair. Wekko says I look like I slept in the exhaust fumes of a school bus and the cloud stuck to my head. Uncounted Bostonian martini lunches (in the past, in the past) have made my eyes perpetually bloodshot. A diet of broiled snapper with my secret basil-based sauce keeps me lean, but key lime pie (a pie a day keeps the doctor away) makes my belly jut out.

"Who owns this historical villa?" Mr. Calahan asked.

I said I worked for the well-known eccentric Egret Cove pelicanthropist Jannie Stevens. Jannie collects pelicans that have lost a wing by a poacher's shotgun or a webbed foot by a twisted fishline. The birds may no longer be able to fly or swim, but they can still flap about the mangroves. They still like to breed there. The young of maimed pelicans will be healthy and normal. Feed the invalid parents and restore the birdlife to the Florida Keys.

Wekko, who had heard my cymbals interfere with the jazz ballad "Twas the Night Before Christmas" (Alvin Batiste on clarinet), came by to enquire. I saw him in time, ran out, and stopped Wekko's rusty bicycle at my gate. Wekko, off-duty that day, was wearing a hermit outfit too: no footwear, bleached and torn bib overalls, a *Hee Haw* hat. I filled him in on recent events.

"Why is he lying?" Wekko asked. "What's in the lost bag?" I agreed with Wekko that we might want to find out. "He thinks I am the caretaker here."

Wekko said he would be the yard man.

Mr. Calahan's clothes were dry. I walked him back to his canoe. Wekko, kneeling next to my mower, stuck in the tough

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Kikuyu grass that I had been trying to cut when it was still light, doffed his straw hat.

Wekko, pointing a flashlight, was studying the mower's innards.

"He's my assistant," I told Mr. Calahan.

"Can you swim, my man?" Mr. Calahan asked.

Wekko said he would try anything once.

"Like a water rat," I said.

Mr. Calahan took time to explain the lost bag incident. He blamed me. He was an experienced boater but nobody is prepared when giant copper cymbals clash in the dark while an unseen madman screams.

Wekko slipped into what he calls "superior southern nigger talk." "You'ze just press charges, Mastah Tourist, and we'll have this here Mastah Caretakah's white ass clapped in irons, get Mastah Caretakah pick up trash on U.S. 1 for a year."

That wouldn't be necessary, Mr. Calahan said. Just find him his lost bag and collect five hundred dollars. He was staying at Egret Inn. Some time soon would be fine. That very evening would be better.

I started up my old F-100 Ford pickup truck and loaded both Mr. Calahan and his canoe.

Egret Inn is close-by.

When I came back, Wekko had gotten his powerful underwater flashlight. We put on snorkel gear and dived into the cove. The bag had moved with the current before getting stuck between some coral, half a mile farther along in the channel. Fortunately the bag was Day-Glo orange and reflected our strobing light. Wekko, flapping his long flippers easily through the cove's murky water, retrieved it.

While we checked the bag's contents, Pussiliano played "Sleigh Ride." Todd Williams's beautiful saxophone's phrasing spread widely over the cove. It was the twenty-third of December, the don had been playing the record since the fifth. John Hendricks, one of my all-time favorites, is the singer on that tune. Mr. Hendricks calls the Christmas deer by name, before telling them to "dash away all." I knew the reindeer names too by then. "Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen . . ."

"I sometimes like 'O Tannenbaum' better," Wekko said. Wekko, whose cabin is about half a mile away from Donsville, can hear the Marsalis record clearly too.

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Mr. Calahan's waterproof bag contained a pair of cheap binoculars, a paperback picture book called *Florida's Fabulous Waterbirds,* a professional-looking radiolike gadget with dials and a telescoped antenna, a bag of apples with a "sale" label, a pack of Monarch king-sized filtertips. When I shook the bag out, a New York subway token fell out.

"Wow," Wekko said.

"Wow," I agreed.

We didn't get it all though. We didn't clearly see that the presence of a New York subway token might confirm Mr. Calahan's New York accent. But didn't he say he was from Chicago? He wouldn't be hiding his true identity now?

The bird book would explain Mister Calahan's knowledge of the iridescent ibis, even if he didn't know what a pelican was.

Why buy pie-cover apples when exotic fruit is plentiful on the Keys? Monarch is an unadvertised low-price supermarket type of cigarette, about fifty cents cheaper than a name-brand.

Why would a man who counts his pennies offer five hundred bucks to retrieve fifty-dollar binoculars and an unidentified electronic gadget?

Wekko and I can't have been thinking.

I switched on the yard lights so we could play basketball before dinner, doing long shots—we're both bad at that. Missing shots makes us walk around. When we walk around we talk.

"What do you think that radio thing was?" Wekko asked.

I said it might be a shortwave radio. Tourists who watch iridescent ibises may be interested in what the weather is going to be. Maybe the birds will be covered by clouds. Hard to see them then, right?

Wekko laughed. "But this time of the year the weather never changes."

Yes, sure, but what do tourists know?

Wekko agreed that tourists know nothing. Neither here nor where they come from. Where they come from nobody knows nothing so they can't impress each other much, but when they are here, waving their credit cards, buying weird-looking weather radios and expensive canoes, the Conchs are impressed.

"Wait a minute, Deputy Sheriff Wekko," I said, "how do you know he bought that canoe? Wouldn't he just rent it?"

Wekko knew because none of the local boat-renting shops carried that type of canoe. Whenever rental agencies lose their

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equipment, the deputy sheriffs race around to find it. Wekko also knew that plastic canoes are sold by the sport store in nearby Key West. One thousand dollars even.

We could have figured that part of the puzzle too, but we didn't.

Why didn't Mr. Calahan rent a rowboat for twenty dollars a day? Why spend a thousand dollars on a plastic canoe?

Because rental agencies only accept credit cards? The credit cards serve as identification. If the boat disappears, the rental agency knows where to find the tourist. But a store has no interest in the identity of a cash client. Mr. Calahan could do his job, let the canoe drift to Cuba. Whatever he got for the job would be a multiple of the cost of the boat and the radio transmitter.

Maybe Wekko and I were puzzled. Maybe we wanted to be puzzled.

Pussiliano was cranking up his sound equipment again.

"Jannie," Wekko shouted, "didn't you say that Pussiliano told you he almost made a billion crooking investors in New York?"

There was too much Christmas racket going on so I didn't answer, but I was thinking about the junky junk bonds. The worst. About Pussiliano selling them. Buying them back cheap when he knew how to make then suddenly go up in value again, confusing clients with "inside" rumors, trading back and forth, to and fro, down and up, long and short, always at great profits.

Another bit of the puzzle that we didn't want to fit in.

Making other people lose big bucks so that he could pick them up would make Pussiliano enemies who could trace him to Egret Key, where he was so visible in the Baleares/Himalayan/Transylvanian/African palace.

Disgruntled and vengeful clients who made propositions Pussiliano couldn't refuse, but maybe had to refuse.

How could the don pay back millions out of the almost-a-billion he maybe owned once? Oh dear oh dear.

I had seen Pussiliano's trash bins standing outside. The bins were stuffed with financial flyers, leaflets, forms, and magazines the investment freak needs for his daily trades. I noticed the computer printouts with fat lines going down, down, down forever. Empty bourbon bottles and beer cans decorated the torn and crumpled paperwork. Pussiliano, former Wall Street whiz kid, was gambling again, this time well away from the humming hub of Manhattan. The don, an outside trader now, was chalking

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up big losses. I could see that from what the garbage truck picked up each week. He could see it himself while his speakers thundered "Silent Night."

And here was Mr. Calahan canoeing through the silent night, holding a remote control that sets off bombs.

We could have figured it out. Could we have warned Pussiliano?

As Wekko pointed out later, that would have been hard.

Maddened by "Jingle Bells," I had tried phoning the noisy neighbor. Each time his taped voice said it didn't want to be bothered and that no messages could be left after no beep.

I had seen him moping about his terrace that day. Don Pussiliano, in spite of Christmas, had gotten himself depressed. When depressed, he would stay in bed mornings, work out late afternoons, drink evenings. The discipline didn't work. Late sleeping made him gloomier. Lifting weights, although it does enlarge the muscular chest that impresses ladies, gave him a backache. Alcohol made him stick a handgun's barrel into his mouth and play with the gun's trigger.

There had been some changes and shifts in our neighborly relationship. We used to wave, but then my dock got loose one stormy evening and floated against his dock. The banging irritated Pussiliano. Instead of calling me or securing the dock himself, he poured gasoline on the offensive structure and lit a match. Tarred planks burn good. The flames woke me, but he wouldn't let me carry my fire extinguisher over. When I kept coming he fired a shotgun over my head.

There was also the time his Mazeratti sports car, driven by drunk hands, crumpled up my picket fence.

There had been stone throwing at poor old Parrot.

The gods testing a hermit's patience.

"Five hundred dollars," Wekko said. "What say I go to the inn to collect our reward?"

Wekko knew full well the money was no issue. He doesn't care for money himself and I have plenty. The question was asked because I'm the senior happy hermit here, mumbling Tantric Buddhist mantras before sunrise every morning.

Wekko wanted my permission before his next action would restore our peace and quiet.

SILENT NIGHT! boomed the speakers.

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Wekko, bag in hand, ready to step on his rusted bicycle, looked at me while Mr. Marsalis led his group into a repeat of "Carol of the Bells." Pussiliano was turning a dial, the beautiful music got louder, changing pleasure into pain. Farther along, on the islets of the pelican sanctuary, nervous baby birds would be tumbling from their nests. Pelican parents do not retrieve their fallen babies.

I sighed.

I thought of the fishbone that nearly choked Wekko when we tried to have dinner with John Hendricks chanting the names of the reindeer. "Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen . . ."

"I would really like to return that radio gadget to Mr. Calahan now," Wekko said.

I dialed Pussiliano's number.

The rude answering tape was still on.

I looked across the picket fence between Donsville and my property. Just a few days earlier on, crazed by the reindeer's name chanting, I had shouted the don's name. A palace window opened, a Browning automatic shotgun barrel appeared. I ducked as Pussiliano kept pulling the trigger and buckshot kept tearing up the leaves of my banana trees.

Wekko was present at the time but, being a neighbor and therefore personally involved, couldn't follow up himself. He suggested calling in fellow officers. We decided against that. Once-almost-a-billionaire can explain in court why he fired shots to warn off a madman. Pussiliano would also bail himself out pronto and get back to the Christmas carols with a vengeance.

I took full responsibility in the end, like the time a porcupine was eating my quaking aspen, destroying the delicate tree, and Wekko cocked his service revolver and looked at me and I nodded sadly and said, "Sure."

Down went the porcupine.

Down went Don Pussiliano, or every-which-way-at-once rather, the next evening, the twenty-fourth, Christmas Eve.

Wekko, after my fateful "sure," bicycled off, barefoot, in his bib overall, with a straw behind his ear, a simple mower of lawns, on his way to Egret Inn to deliver a bag of what the innocent manual laborer presumed to be lost and found bird-watcher's tools, and collect five hundred big ones from Mr. Calahan, a rich Chicago tourist.

Mr. Calahan grabbed the bag and paid up.

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"What's your name, my man?" Mr. Calahan asked.

Wekko doffed the remnants of his hat. "Malcolm XI, Sah."

That was the twenty-third.

December twenty-fourth, minutes after sunset, the body of Don Pussiliano was torn to shreds, to the tune of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," by flying objects cast from hard plastic. The objects were parts of exploded Christmas sculptures. Heads of Dancer and Prancer, branches of imitation trees, the feet of Father Christmas, the tail of a magi's camel, the body of the Infant tore themselves loose and killed their collector.

The Merry Gentleman rested forever after his huge Sony loudspeakers burned.

Later Donsville itself burned too, because flaming Joseph and Mary fragments broke through windows and got stuck in carpets and curtains.

The Fire Brigade, due to tourist Christmas traffic clogging U.S. 1, arrived too late to save the building.

The police arrived too.

What could I tell them?

When the plastic puppets killed Pussiliano I was in my room, blindfolded, ears plugged.

Suddenly the ground trembled.

A Christmas earthquake? I removed fold and plugs, ran outside, saw the devastation next-door, found a phone, dialed 911.

"You did good," the state police detective said.

"So what happened?" I asked.

"Bunch of computerized bombs placed by a perp who sneaked in by boat," the detective said. "Bombs may have been triggered by the same computer wizard, watching from the cove maybe."

The state police detective said he hated computers and everything computers stood for. Didn't like to deal with computers. If perps were going to kill each other off by hard-to-trace computer, okay, let them do it.

"Well, Officer," I said, "I did see a birdwatcher who didn't know about birds prowling about last night. What if he stuck the bombs in Pussiliano's Christmas ornaments? Suspect said he was staying at Egret Inn."

The detective went to check at the inn. He was back in minutes.

"Looks like we have a hit man here," the detective said. He also said he didn't care for hit men. "Professionals, right? Leave

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no records. Pay cash. The canoe perp used is still at the inn. Perp didn't rent a car but got himself driven about in cabs. Taxi took him to the airport tonight." The detective pointed in the direction of Miami. "Half-hour flight. Up and away." He said he hated perps who flew away in planes.

The detective left. Wekko came in to play a little basketball and to ask what was for dinner.

"Wekko," I said, "I think we should give up hermiting. I think we failed our tests. We didn't have a relaxed attitude. We actually killed a man just because he played a little Christmas music."

Wekko shrugged. "Nah."

"Nah what?"

"*We* didn't kill Don Pussiliano," Wekko said. "I did, by returning that radio transmitter to the hit man so that he could canoe back to Donsville and blow up the don."

"You asked for my permission," I said.

Wekko thought that was funny. He was a grown-up happy hermit now, he could make his own decisions.

So why ask me, the senior hermit?

Just to be polite, Wekko said. Why worry anyway? If he hadn't returned the bag, the hit man still had time to pick up a new transmitter at Radio Shack in Key West, or the parts to build one. This is America, an efficient, helpful country. Not returning the gadget wouldn't have saved Pussiliano's life.

I felt like a little nitpicking. "Why would a hit man who smokes discounted cigarettes pay five hundred hard-earned dollars to retrieve fifty dollars' worth of a replaceable gadget?"

"To remove the evidence, Jannie."

We played basketball, with me missing the basket a lot while I thought. I wasn't quite my former happy self yet. Pussiliano wasn't going to be missed and I planned to have the pelican sanctuary buy the remains of Donsville so that we would never hear bells jingle again, but what about Mr. Calahan? Our returning the gadget had, as Wekko pointed out, removed evidence. The professional killer, a man harmful to society, would now be even harder to catch. Shouldn't happy hermits do good? Help to remove bad hit men?

"Nah," Wekko said.

I broiled a freshly caught grouper and served it with my secret herb sauce, but the fish could have tasted better.

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"You want to improve the world?" Wekko asked. "What sort of a detached hermit are you?"

We had discussed the issue before. Wekko claimed that hermits see through evil, they don't try to remove it.

"But we have a professional killer here, Wekko. Why didn't we catch Mr. Calahan? We had all the evidence, we could have picked up on the pelican-ibis confusion, the New York-Chicago lie, the transmitter–weather-radio mix-up."

"Did we want to?"

"It's never too late, Wekko."

"Aren't you happy Donsville is gone?" Wekko asked.

Yes, of course I was.

"So *be* happy."

In the end Wekko took pity on me. If I didn't want a bad guy, a sadistic killer who puts bombs in Christmas puppets, around, well, so be it.

"Let's do our stuff," Wekko said.

Voodoo stuff scares me. Wekko has some skills, but for a serious exercise like the one we were planning he needed assistance. What happens when a black African nihilist skinhead and a crazed white European pursuer of truth join their death rays? Wekko has his own magic disciplines and I have been into the Tantric exercises for years now, but the idea was to liberate myself, kill off the ego, that sort of ideal stuff; I had never tried my hand at getting rid of bad guys.

I wouldn't let a fellow happy hermit slave by himself though.

Wekko and I can both sew, and we have some artistic talents. We made a doll with yellow pants and orange shirt, gave him a crooked nose and long greasy hair.

"He looks good?"

"He looks good."

We burned bad incense around little Mr. Calahan; I clashed my cymbals, softly this time, and whispered the Apache curses; I danced and concentrated. Wekko, just in case Mr. Calahan had some dark forces of his own, went all out that night. When Wekko chants voodoo my dentures clatter.

The doll, as it was thrown by Wekko into my trash can after the ceremony was over, looked, by the way happenstance made it point its little arms, as if it were diving. "Did you see that?" Wekko asked.

I imitated the doll's involuntary posturing.

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Wekko nodded. "So you saw it."

"What does that mean, sorcerer Wekko?"

It meant that Mr. Calahan would be diving too.

And what would the squeaky sounds mean? The terrified mad chirping coming from the trash can?

"Mice?" Wekko asked.

Yes. Right. But in voodoo?

Wekko said we would soon find out.

I really don't understand voodoo at all, maybe that's why it scares me.

What particularly frightens me now is that voodoo can go back in time. We did our ceremony at eleven P.M. and Mr. Calahan died around ten P.M., we heard that the next day: on Channel 5, the twenty-fifth, Christmas morning.

"An unidentified tourist," our bright and beautiful TV news reader said, "died bizarrely last night off U.S. 1, Milepost 11, on the east side."

Wekko figured it all out later, from police reports at the sheriff's office and from a private investigation he conducted out of Key West.

Mr. Calahan—his real name was Victor Irk Russo, a suspected "hired gun," never charged, never caught—missed his plane because the cab that took him from Egret Key to nearby Key West airport had a flat tire. There was no other plane scheduled out of Key West that night. Eager to get out of the small insular Keys into the vast mainland, Mr. Calahan now needed private transport. As he didn't carry any identification, he couldn't rent a car. Cabs willing to drive the 124 miles to Miami are hard to find on Christmas Eve.

Cars are easily stolen from drunks. Mr. Calahan visited the Red Parrot, a topless bar off Duval Street, Key West. He bought a few rounds, tried to sip soda pop himself, but the girls made him drink alcohol along with the other clients.

We all have our weaknesses. Mr. Calahan was a drinking man. After the tension of the last few days, urged on by attractive companions, our alcoholic succumbed, but he did manage to lift a fellow drunk's car keys. The keys fitted a new Toyota pickup parked behind the Red Parrot.

There's only one road out of Key West. As he drove along a two-lane part of U.S. 1, a cyclist swerved into the Toyota's path.

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Mr. Calahan overreacted. The truck drove into the mangrove swamp on the side of the highway.

Mr. Calahan now panicked. He worried that the caretaker and the yardman of the house next-door to Donsville, suspicious after the fire and death, would have passed the "birdwatcher" 's description to the police.

Apart from facing a possible murder charge, he was now definitely drunk behind the wheel of a stolen vehicle.

"He dived into the swamp," Wekko said.

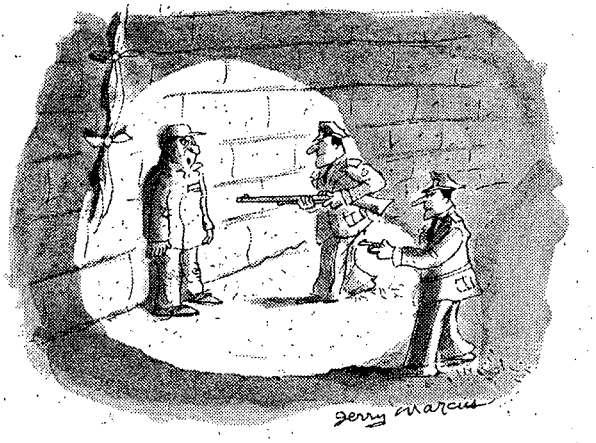
So, fine, he would get a little wet, the bugs would bite, eventually someone would see the fugitive flounder about between the air-roots of the mangroves, the cops would pick him up, etc. He wasn't dead yet.

You never know what you get with voodoo.

Giant sea crocodiles are an endangered species and there may be only a few left in our swamps, but Wekko's and my combined spiritual efforts sure as hell raised one.

The pretty news reader showed a picture. The beast was decorated with Christmas garlands, blown out to sea by the Donsville explosions.

According to witnesses on U.S. 1, Mr. Calahan only stopped yelling when the giant crocodile bit off his head. ●



"This is gonna be embarrassing, all the guys threw me a going away party!"

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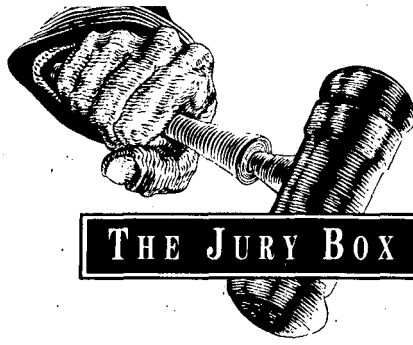

by Jon L. Breen

With the growth of mystery fandom in the past couple of decades, resulting in more and more contact between and among writers and readers via conventions, periodicals, and even online chat rooms, the mystery world itself has become an increasingly frequent fictional background. At its best, the self-referential mystery can be almost as much fun for the reader as for the writer, who gets the chance to drop the names of famous real-life contemporaries, plug the works of friends, base characters (subtly or otherwise) on real personalities in the field, give vent to opinions on the state of the genre, and nudge the knowledgeable reader with any number of inside jokes and allusions. Here are four recent examples of the mystery-about-mysteries with varying degrees of success.

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*** John Harvey: *Living Proof,* Holt, $22.50. When American private-eye writer Cathy Jordan receives ugly threats prior to her appearance at Nottingham's Shots in the Dark mystery festival (a real event), widely admired series cop Charlie Resnick takes on her protection. Harvey does one of the best jobs I've seen of incorporating mystery world material into his story without seeming too self-indulgent, and his pastiche of first-person-female private eye writing is on the money. Though the plot, also involving a serial killer of a prostitute's johns, is not quite as engaging as the style and characters, Harvey lives up to his growing reputation as a formidable police procedural writer.

*** Richard A. Lupoff: *The Cover Girl Killer,* St. Martin's, $21.95. For readers (like me)

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who share the author's interests in certain areas of twentieth-century history and popular culture, the series about insurance investigator Hobart Lindsey and Berkeley police detective Marvia Plum is one of the most enjoyable going. This time, a multimillionaire who dies (possibly murdered) in a Lake Tahoe helicopter crash lists as beneficiary of his insurance policy "the girl on the cover of *Death in the Ditch,*" an early-fifties paperback from an obscure and short-lived publisher. The plot also involves memories of American volunteers against fascism in the Spanish Civil War. Lupoff has a special knack for creating older characters, who are presented realistically, respectfully, affectionately, and never patronizingly. A real (non-senior) person who figures prominently, albeit offstage, is paperback collector and fan publisher Gary Lovisi.

*** H. Paul Jeffers: *A Grand Night for Murder,* St. Martin's, $20.95. Shortly after receiving the Grand Master Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America, true-crime writer Jonathan Dodge is found murdered in a colleague's boathouse, and suspicion centers on the luminaries (all fictitious, at least some of whose models mystery insiders will recognize) who shared his table at the awards banquet. Handling the sleuthing are D.A.'s investigator Arlene Flynn and a couple of New York detectives. Jeffers, whose books are always replete with Sherlockian and old radio references, delivers an enjoyable fair-play puzzle. (Some cops are mystery readers: Chief of Detectives Goldstein's imploring of his sergeant to read mysteries recalls a classic mystery reader's mystery, Elizabeth Linington's *Greenmask* [1964].)

** Neil McGaughey: *And Then There Were Ten,* Scribners, $21. In his second case, detecting mystery book reviewer Stokes Moran spends part of his time trying to find out who stole a pornographic video from an elderly agent and part picking his all-time ten favorite mystery novels. The group he comes up with are an admirable group for the most part, but incorporating them into the narrative is not a good idea. (For an especially horrible example of cutesy self-indulgence, see page 163—though this is no reflection on the very worthy writer McGaughey is celebrating.) That Moran, whose quoted reviews of real books in the chapter headings are less than scintillating, gets offered a

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$50,000 advance for a coffee-table book about his mystery favorites is even more incredible than the whodunit plot.

**** John Lutz: *Death by Jury,* St. Martin's, $23.95. St. Louis private eye Nudger goes to work for flamboyant defense attorney Lawrence Fleck, whose client, a banker accused of murdering his wife, is oddly reluctant to cooperate in his own defense. The resulting plot is one of the author's trickiest, and the prose, humor, and character drawing are at his usual high level. Lutz, who recently received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Private Eye Writers of America, continues to prove he's among crime fiction's best current practitioners.

*** Kate Wilhelm: *A Flush of Shadows,* St. Martin's, $22.95. Three of the five novellas collected here, all concerning the husband-and-wife sleuthing team of psychologist Constance Leidl and former arson cop Charlie Meiklejohn, first appeared in science fiction periodicals, two in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* and one in *Omni.* These three focus on paranormal and mystical elements and, though skillfully done, are frankly not my cup of tea. The other two, "All for One" and "Torch Song," longer than the others and not previously published, explore more mundane mysteries and for me were the best in the book—but that may be a genre bias speaking. In whatever genre, Wilhelm is among the solidest of pros.

** Gar Anthony Haywood: *Bad News Travels Fast,* Putnam, $21.95. Another husband-and-wife sleuthing team, wandering retirees Joe and Dottie Loudermilk, pull their Airstream trailer into Washington, D.C., and find their sightseeing limited by the need to pull another of their troublesome children out of a murder charge. Dottie's distinctive and comic narrative voice is intact—see pages six and seven for an especially nice riff on the joys of parenting adult children—but in contrast to 1994's brief and spare *Going Nowhere Fast,* this one is padded and flabby, demonstrating how damaging the drive for greater length can be. (Another reason to flog the editor: On page seventy-nine is a reference to the "adjective" *wickedly,* an error the author surely didn't intend the literate Dottie to make.)

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The Killdeer Chronicles

by Edward D. Hoch

The Killdeer Chronicles
by Norman Maguire

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The minute mystery isn't a form we normally associate with Edward D. Hoch but, ever inventive, the author has found a way to draw together four such miniature mysteries in a single full-length crime tale. In doing so, he introduces a new sleuth, retired actor Jonas Killdeer, who might be counted as a series character even if he never appears again, by virtue of cracking these four separate cases. †

Forword and Dedication

These stories grew out of a tragedy. Just over a year ago my beloved wife Diana was killed in a boating accident at a lake near our home. We had been married for twelve glorious years—years that I consider the happiest of my entire life.

In the months that followed, I was to discover the meaning of true loneliness. We had no children to comfort me and our friends could do only so much. The holidays especially were times for remembrance and private sorrow. Finally, to fill these holidays, I devised a simple strategy. I am a writer, after all, and I decided to compose a short detective story on each of the major seasonal holidays—Easter, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The stories would be started and completed on the holiday itself, thereby ensuring my own very personal celebration while others were with their families.

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I invented a new detective to solve these special crimes and I called him Jonas Killdeer. The stories appeared in magazines as they were written and met with some success. I am now pleased to present them together for the first time in this little book. Written out of the depths of my despair, they are dedicated to my late wife, Diana Cerf Maguire.

The Last Chocolate Egg

It was toward evening on Easter Sunday when Sergeant Bennett parked his unmarked car in front of the old stone house where Jonas Killdeer had resided for as long as Bennett had known him. Killdeer was a retired actor who sometimes viewed life as one long stage presentation. Financially independent, he spent his days working out all sorts of puzzles. After breakfast each morning he would begin, progressing from crosswords to perhaps an afternoon at the race track and an evening of chess with a friend.

Sergeant Bennett did not play chess, and his only contact with Jonas Killdeer came when he went, like this, to consult the man about a particularly puzzling case. The crime that would become known as the Easter poisoning was indeed puzzling.

It was Jonas himself who answered the door. He lived alone in the big house, but Bennett had half expected that his sister or some other relatives might be visiting for the holiday. "No, no, no!" he assured the sergeant. "I'm all alone. Come right in, you're not interrupting a thing."

"I can hear voices—"

The tall man smiled. His mellow voice filled the room when he spoke, as if he were still on stage. "That's only an audiotape of one of my performances. I often play them in the evening, to recapture the sounds of my younger days. Do you ever indulge yourself like that, Sergeant?"

"I guess not. My wife started keeping a scrapbook of cases I'd worked on, but she gave it up after the first couple of years when our daughter was born."

"Come join me for a glass of Easter wine," Jonas Killdeer suggested. "I fancy you're working on a case or you would be home with your family today."

"We had an Easter egg hunt for the kids this morning. I went in to work at four and had a murder case by five-fifteen. It's only a few blocks from here, which is why I thought of you."

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"A shooting?" Jonas asked.

"No. As a matter of fact, it seems to be a poisoning."

The old actor was immediately alert. "Poisoning is not so common in contemporary America. Tell me about it."

"The Martins—that's Natalie and her husband Oliver—were having Easter dinner for two other couples, her sister and brother-in-law and some neighbors. Oliver Martin's a man in his late thirties, in public relations. They had a traditional Easter ham and a bottle of white wine. Martin has a small wine cellar in the basement and he went down for a bottle of after-dinner brandy while Natalie was serving dessert, small chocolate cakes in the shape of eggs, with chocolate frosting. She'd purchased a half-dozen of them at the local bakery the previous day. She placed them on a tray in the center of the table and the four guests helped themselves. She took a fifth one and placed it on her dessert plate. Then she carried the tray with its remaining chocolate egg to the kitchen, where her husband was opening the bottle of brandy. The door was open and the others saw him take it from the tray and eat it with his fingers. He was dead within minutes."

"The others suffered no ill effects?"

"None. Of course they'd only just started their cakes, but the remains that we examined seemed harmless."

Jonas Killdeer pursed his lips, deep in thought. "You say this is only a few blocks away. Could you take me there?"

"Certainly. My car's outside."

The old neighborhood of stately homes where Killdeer lived was quite close to the newer homes that had been built a decade ago with young families in mind. The Martins occupied one of these, in a neighborhood where the sight of police cars and an ambulance had brought out the local residents in force. The adults tended to cluster together in muted speculation across the narrow street, while the children ran and played.

As Jonas followed Sergeant Bennett into the house, the stretcher with its body bag was just being removed. "What sort of poison was it?" he asked the detective.

"Probably some form of cyanide, judging by how fast it worked. But we'll have to wait for the autopsy to be sure."

Two men and a woman were seated together in the family room, uncomfortably silent. Bennett merely nodded to them and led Jonas Killdeer into a back bedroom. "The neighbors and the brother-in-law," he said quietly.

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"Suspects?"

The detective shrugged. They entered the master bedroom, where an attractive young woman was lying fully clothed on top of the spread. A second woman, perhaps five years older, was bathing her face with a damp cloth. It was easy to see they were sisters. "I hate to bother you again, Mrs. Martin. This is Jonas Killdeer who sometimes assists us in an unofficial capacity. He has just a few questions which might help in the investigation."

Before Natalie Martin could respond, the other woman said, "Mr. Killdeer, I'm her sister, Margaret Campbell. I was present when it happened. I'm sure I could answer any questions you have for Natalie."

"I regret intruding on your sorrow at such a time," Jonas said, seating himself without invitation at the foot of the bed. "Did you purchase this dessert, Mrs. Martin, or did one of the guests bring it?"

"She purchased it," Margaret replied as Natalie opened her mouth to respond.

Bennett frowned. "Please let your sister answer, Mrs. Campbell."

Jonas Killdeer stared at the woman on the bed, giving her a kindly smile. Finally she spoke. "I bought six of the chocolate egg cakes at Pralene's Bakery on Saturday. Yesterday. I wanted some sort of Easter dessert and candy rabbits seemed a bit too juvenile."

"Your husband ate his in the kitchen?"

Natalie nodded. "He was always doing that with snacks that he especially liked—wolfing them down in the kitchen, even when we had guests. The poison couldn't have been meant for him, though. Any one of us might have chosen that egg."

"Still, it seems odd that only one egg was bad if the poison was introduced at the bakery." Killdeer turned to Sergeant Bennett. "There have been no other reports of poisonings?"

"None. We've already contacted the bakery owners and broadcast a warning on television. We're assuming only the one egg was poisoned. If it was cyanide, it was probably injected with a hypodermic needle into the bottom of the cake, so the needle mark wouldn't be visible in the frosting."

"And Mr. Martin died in the kitchen?"

"That's right," Margaret Campbell replied. "We all saw it through the doorway. Natalie had her napkin and she took a cake for herself and then carried the tray out to the kitchen. We

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saw Oliver take a bite out of the last cake before he went into convulsions."

"I'd like to see the kitchen," Jonas requested.

Sergeant Bennett led him out to where the police photographer and the other technicians were packing their equipment. "All done here," one of them said. "We got some fingerprints off the cake box, for whatever it's worth."

"This box here?" Jonas Killdeer moved to a white cardboard box, fairly large, that had held the cakes. A price of $6.65 had been penciled on it.

One of the men from the family room poked his head in the kitchen door. "Can we go home now? Rita and I live right next door. You can find us easily enough if you have more questions."

Bennett glanced at Jonas. "Just a couple minutes more. You got any questions for them?"

Jonas shook his head. "I think it's pretty clear what happened."

"Is it?"

"I should speak to Mrs. Martin and her sister again."

They returned to the bedroom where Natalie Martin had recovered somewhat and was at the mirror, combing her hair. Jonas smiled at her again. "Mrs. Martin, there's just one point I'm not clear on. If you disliked your husband wolfing down food in the kitchen when you had company, why would you carry the tray and the one remaining chocolate egg out there to him?"

"I don't know. I just wanted to get it off the table."

"But you had placed your own cake on your dessert plate. Why didn't you do the same with his?"

Her face had grown pale. "I don't know. I wasn't thinking."

"I submit that you were thinking all too clearly, Mrs. Martin. You poisoned that cake and made certain your husband ate it."

"That's ridiculous! I told you any one of us might have eaten that cake. Each person chose their own. How could I be sure Oliver would get that one?"

"Your sister said you were carrying a napkin. I submit that the poisoned egg was hidden in the napkin, and you carried the tray out to the kitchen so you'd have an opportunity to switch the eggs while your back was turned to the other guests. Oliver got the poisoned cake while the good one went into your napkin."

She simply shook her head. "That would mean there had to be seven eggs, and I only bought six."

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"Bakeries price items like this individually. The price on the box was six sixty-five. It might have been a special price for six, but isn't it more likely it was the price for seven cakes at ninety-five cents each?"

"You'll have to prove that," she said, her face frozen now in fear.

"Oh, I think they'll remember you at the Pralene Bakery. And if we're lucky Sergeant Bennett might even find the unpoisoned cake in your garbage disposal."

That's where he found it.

A Hit for Sarah

For most of the year Jonas Killdeer was content to live out his retirement from acting in the big old stone house where he'd spent much of his life. But there was one event each summer to which he always looked forward. A number of show-business people, mostly young and "between engagements," gathered on the Fourth of July for an Independence Day picnic and softball game at Gus Ryan's farm upstate. It was an hour's drive from the city, and one of the young men was always assigned the task of bringing Jonas. This year it was a dancer named Eric Sears who'd drawn the assignment. He'd been in the touring company of *Les Miserables,* and they spent much of the drive to the farm discussing the joys and horrors of life on the road.

Gus Ryan himself came out to greet them. He was a white-haired man, a bit younger than Jonas, who'd retired to the farm with a male companion about ten years earlier. He'd never been a great success on stage, but everyone liked Gus. They especially liked him on Independence Day when he threw a great party for show people.

"I see the softball game is already under way," Jonas remarked.

"They're just warming up. We wouldn't start without you. Want to umpire again this year?"

Jonas laughed. "No, no—that's for the younger people like yourself."

Gus's companion, Mark Fleming, was tapping a keg of beer while some of the others watched. There were around forty people scattered about the farm, and even a few children playing off in the distance. By evening the number would probably double.

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Neil Maynard, a handsome leading man who might have been a matinée idol in another era, was swinging one of the aluminum bats as he warmed up for the game. Jonas knew him slightly, and when Neil put down the bat he went over to shake hands. "I seem to remember you won the game for your team last year, Neil."

The young actor was pleased by Killdeer's memory. "I haven't played much this season. I have a new interest now." He grabbed a lovely young woman with dark hair and perfect skin who was walking by. "Sarah, this is Jonas Killdeer, a living legend in the Broadway theater. Jonas, meet Sarah Kane."

"My pleasure," Jonas said with a slight bow.

"Sarah's waiting for her first Broadway hit. We're sharing expenses in the meantime."

She blushed a bit at his words but didn't offer an objection. "It's difficult breaking in. Neil's been a great help."

"Let's see if he can be a great help in the ball game!" Gus Ryan called to them. "We're ready to start. I'll be the umpire since you declined, Jonas."

Everyone grabbed some beer and headed back toward the open field. It was probably about the size of an average softball field, with a stand of trees and brush beyond the outfield. As usual, there was a friendly dispute about who would play on which team. They had twenty-eight young men and women anxious to take part, so each team got the standard ten plus four extras for pitching and substitute hitting. Jonas saw that Maynard and his girlfriend Sarah had split up. She was in the outfield for the blue team while he was a pinch hitter for the red team. Maynard went to sit on the sidelines, where he engaged in a quiet but heated conversation with Jonas's driver, Eric Sears.

Eric was playing third base, but when he got up to bat in the second inning the team's coach called him back. "We need a lefty against this pitcher," he decided. "Who've we got?"

"Neil!" several people yelled at once, and Maynard went up to pinch hit for Sears. He slammed a home run that went over Sarah's head and into the bushes, sending her searching for the ball.

After another two innings Jonas drifted back to the farmhouse. A few mothers were still with the toddlers in the orchard, and he found Mark Fleming alone in the kitchen mixing a gigantic salad for later. "Not a baseball fan?" Jonas asked.

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"I leave that to Gus. It's his game. He likes to umpire. It's like acting, I guess." He was slicing cucumbers as he spoke, his right hand moving almost faster than Jonas could follow.

"You should do that professionally."

Fleming grinned. "I was a salad chef at the Plaza for three years. There's a knack to it."

Jonas went out and played with the children for a time, then drifted back to the softball game. The blue team was leading and someone told him it was the bottom of the sixth. A stout, middle-aged man flied out, and it was the red team's turn. Jonas watched the blues take the field, surprised that he knew so few of them. Many of his old friends were gone, or reduced to playing dinner theaters for a fraction of their old salaries.

The first man up hit a solid fly to center field. It got by Sarah Kane and sent her into the bushes in pursuit. Just then a string of firecrackers started sputtering off in the grass beyond left field. Gus usually saved them till after dark, but somebody always got an early start.

As the sound of the firecrackers ceased, the players noticed that Sarah had still not returned from the overgrown area beyond the field. "Sarah!" Gus Ryan called out. "Where are you?"

He started toward the bushes with the other outfielders, and Neil Maynard came running across the field to join them. It was Maynard's terrible shout a moment later that brought everyone else to the scene. Sarah Kane lay on her face in the tall grass, the left side of her head bashed and bloody from a terrible blow. One of the aluminum bats was nearby, its bloodied side half hidden by the grass.

Sarah Kane had finally gotten her hit, but not in the way she'd expected.

While they waited for the state police to arrive, Gus tried to keep everyone clear of the body. Jonas had seen enough in his first glance to know what had happened. The softball was by her right hand. The trampled grass showed that the killer, perhaps lying in wait for such an opportunity, had approached from the rear and swung the bat. She'd never known what hit her. While the others clustered within sight of the body, Jonas walked over to where the firecrackers had gone off. It was within throwing distance of Sarah's body. The killer had lit the fuses

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and tossed them to divert attention while he escaped back through the woods.

"It couldn't have been any of us," Eric Sears argued. "We all loved Sarah."

Mark Fleming agreed. He'd come back with Gus after the police were called, his half-finished salad forgotten now. "A prowler in the woods," he suggested. "We've had tramps come through here before and break into the house."

"Perhaps," Jonas said. The sun was hot in midafternoon, and he was anxious to return to the shelter of the farmhouse. But there was something he had to do first. "While we're waiting, I'd like to suggest that everyone take up the positions they were in at the time of the murder. It will help clarify our stories to the investigators."

They did as he suggested, responding perhaps to his grandfatherly position as the eldest among them. Fleming went off toward the house with the mothers and their toddlers, while the adults and teenagers took up their places on the field or seated on the benches. Jonas studied them, then walked over to where the blue team's four extra players sat. All were men, and each was wearing a watch on his left wrist. It saved Jonas from asking the question on the tip of his tongue, and it told him who had killed Sarah Kane.

"Gather round, everyone," he urged. "The police will be here momentarily, but I think we can complete the investigation without them."

"You think a tramp killed Sarah?" Neil asked.

"No, the killer is one of us. It had to be someone who had access to one of the aluminum bats. That means it had to be someone here at the ball field or back at the farmhouse, where there might have been an extra bat. A wanderer in the woods would have no motive for killing this young woman he didn't even know, and he'd have no bat to kill her with. It's obvious from the position of the body and the trampled grass that she was hit from behind, and the blow was to the left side of her head. The killer, swinging the bat with such force from behind her, had to be a left-handed hitter."

"There are probably a few of those around," Gus said. "I'm left-handed myself."

"But you were on the field the entire time, acting as umpire. The killer could not have been one of Sarah's blue team for the

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same reason. They were on the field in full view of the rest of us. I just established for myself that the four substitute players are all right-handed. Who does that leave? The mothers with their small children couldn't have slipped away without being noticed. Mark Fleming was in the kitchen preparing his salad, but I had a vivid demonstration of his right-handedness in cutting cucumbers."

"You've eliminated everyone but the red team," Eric observed.

"Exactly!" Jonas let his eyes scan their faces. "We know you're not left-handed, Eric, because they pulled you from the batting order for a left-handed hitter. And who was that?"

"Of course! He was the only left-hander available to the red team, and the only one who could have slipped away with that extra bat and waited in the woods until Sarah chased a ball in there."

Neil started to move, but already strong hands were holding onto him. "We argued about her," Eric said. "I'd just told him we loved each other and she was going to leave him for me. God! Why didn't he kill me instead of Sarah?"

"She was the one I loved," Neil muttered. "She was the one who betrayed me."

Then they heard the sirens, and they fell silent.

The Thanksgiving Chicken

It was a Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, and the autumn weather had turned chilly. Jonas Killdeer was at home in his big stone house, thankful he had no reason to go out, when Sergeant Bennett phoned him from police headquarters.

"Sorry to bother you, but we've had an incident down at the courthouse. Someone suggested you might help."

"A murder?" Jonas asked. Since his retirement from an acting career on Broadway he'd helped the police on a few murder cases, with surprisingly good results.

"Well, not a human sort of murder," the detective told him.

Jonas smiled into the telephone. "You know how to tempt me. Are you at the courthouse now?"

"I'll send a car for you. I'll be just inside the front door, before you go through the metal detector."

Jonas had never needed a car when he lived in Manhattan. Up in Westchester it was different, and he'd come to depend—like

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Blanche DuBois—on the kindness of strangers. The sergeant often picked him up or sent a police car when his help was desired.

Thirty minutes later he entered the courthouse and met Sergeant Bennett, a balding middle-aged man who had made police work a personal crusade. "Glad you could come, Jonas," he said, using the retired actor's given name in a rare instance of comradeship. "We've got a weird one up on the third floor."

Jonas followed him into the elevator. The third floor was divided into courtrooms, jury rooms, judges' chambers, and waiting areas for families and witnesses. At one in the afternoon the trials were on lunch break, but a number of people were milling about. One corridor had been blocked off with yellow police tape. Bennett led him to it and raised the tape so Jonas could duck beneath it.

The old actor stared at the scorched marble floor and the charred remains of some sort of large bird. "Any idea what it is?"

Bennett shrugged. "A bailiff spotted the fire around eleven o'clock and put it out with an extinguisher. He called the bomb squad. That's the first thing everyone thinks of these days. They were going to remove it but I wanted you to see it first. Someone joked it must be a small turkey since tomorrow is Thanksgiving, but it looks more like a chicken to me."

Jonas poked at it with a pencil. "It is a chicken. It's been sacrificed."

"What?"

"Could you get me a list of the trials in session today, especially on this floor?"

"Sure. There are only four courtrooms." He went off and returned in less than five minutes with a copy of the trial docket.

"This one," Jonas said at once, pointing to *The People v. Ramon Sanchez.*

"An eighteen-year-old kid accused of grand theft auto."

"Joy-riding?"

"More than that," Sergeant Bennett said. "He hijacked a carload of cocaine from some dealers. We couldn't prove he knew the drugs were in the car, so all we charged him with was the car theft. Why'd you pick him?"

"The chicken was probably sacrificed as part of a voodoo rite."

"In a courthouse?"

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"It happens frequently in Miami, where they have a large population of immigrants from the West Indies."

"But how could someone get a chicken into the courthouse past security?"

Jonas smiled. "No metal parts."

Ramon Sanchez had been living with his aunt and uncle when he was arrested. Court records showed that both of them had come from the Dominican Republic. Their names were Nunzio and Maria Macoris, and Maria was the sister of Ramon's mother.

"Is there voodoo in the Dominican Republic?" Bennett asked.

"Some, certainly. The country shares an island with Haiti, where voodoo is widely practiced."

"We'd better talk to the aunt and uncle."

Nunzio was a rough-looking man of about forty who used an aluminum cane because of a knee injury he'd suffered working on the docks of Santo Domingo. It was then, he told Jonas and Sergeant Bennett, that he and Maria had come to New York and later to Westchester. When Maria's sister fell ill, Ramon had been sent to live with them. "He's a good boy," Nunzio insisted. "This business with the car is a terrible mistake."

"Did you sacrifice a chicken so the jury would free him?" Bennett asked.

"We are good Catholics. We practice no voodoo."

"What about Ramon? He's free on bail. Where is he right now?"

"Over there." He pointed at a dark-skinned young man whom they hadn't noticed, probably because with his moustache and slicked-down hair he looked more like twenty-five than eighteen.

When his uncle pointed, Ramon Sanchez walked over to join them. "What's this?" he asked. "More lawyers?"

"Police," Bennett identified himself. "We're investigating the fire a couple of hours ago. Know anything about it?"

"I was in the courtroom. The judge and everyone else will tell you that."

"They take a morning break."

"The fire came after the break. My lawyer had to stop the testimony till we found out what the trouble was."

"What's your lawyer's name?" Jonas asked.

"Ralph Schindler. You want to ask him? He's coming back now."

Schindler was a well-dressed attorney who'd obviously instructed Sanchez how to dress for his court appearance. "You're

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holding up good in there," he told the defendant, patting his shoulder. "Mr. Macoris, I expect we'll be calling you and your wife this afternoon. I'd really like to wind up our case before the long holiday weekend."

"Where is Maria?" her husband asked.

"I thought she was here with you. Did she go out for something to eat?"

The courtroom doors were standing open and Ramon peered inside. "Here she is, taking a nap!"

Nunzio started for the courtroom, leaning on his cane. "She shouldn't be in there," the lawyer said. "She hasn't testified yet."

Jonas was at the courtroom door as Ramon Sanchez reached his aunt. He saw the young man gasp and turn away. "What is it?" he asked, but then he saw the handle of the ice pick protruding from just under her left breast.

Jonas Killdeer had planned to spend Thanksgiving Day alone, as he usually did since his retirement. His closest theater friends were working, and his sister was visiting her husband's family. He certainly hadn't expected to dine with Sergeant Bennett—Matt Bennett—and his wife Kelly.

It wasn't until Kelly was serving the pumpkin pie that Bennett asked, "Have you had long enough to think about it?"

"I suppose so," Jonas answered.

"The feeling is that the kid killed her because she wasn't going to back his alibi."

"So he stabs her with an ice pick in the courtroom during lunch hour? Be reasonable, Sergeant."

"Call me Matt, Jonas."

"All right, Matt. Tell me what you've found so far. What about the chicken?"

"It was a sacrifice, just like you said. The lab found traces of various spices and herbs that were added to the bird before the fire. It's all part of the voodoo formula."

Kelly Bennett, who took none of it seriously, commented, "I wonder if that recipe would have worked on my turkey."

"It worked on the judge. After the murder in his courtroom he declared a mistrial. Schindler claimed he couldn't continue with the defense with his star alibi witness dead, and the judge agreed."

"What about the chicken?"

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"That much we've solved," Bennett confirmed. "Maria Macoris brought it to the courthouse and sacrificed it. In her large purse we found the plastic bag she carried it in, together with the various spices and herbs. And matches. But that doesn't tell us who killed her."

Jonas smiled at Kelly. "This pie is delicious, Mrs. Bennett."

"I'm glad you like it."

He turned back to her husband. "I suppose the voodoo was the last straw for him. He must have detested what she was doing, and he used the ice pick he always carried with him."

"Who, for God's sake?"

"Nunzio, of course. He's the only one who could have killed his wife. An ice pick is a metal implement. How do you think it got through the metal detectors at the entrance? Not in the bag with the sacrificial chicken, not in the lawyer's briefcase. It got through the metal detector in Nunzio's hollow aluminum cane."

Christmas Curtain

Gus Ryan, famed for his annual Independence Day parties, had been lured out of retirement that fall to play Herod in a revival of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. It was a short play inflated to eighty minutes by dancing, and when it was still running at a little off-Broadway theater in December, Gus arranged to have a party on stage for his friends after the Sunday matinée just before Christmas. After not being on a stage in nearly ten years, retired actor Jonas Killdeer was looking forward to the event.

He took the noon train to the city from his home in Westchester, arriving in time for the matinée performance. Seeing Gus Ryan on stage again, even heavily made-up as Herod, was a treat. When the audience departed and the partygoers began to gather, Jonas found several old friends to chat with.

Nathan Mills, the theatrical agent, shook hands warmly and said, "I hear talk that you're a regular private eye these days!"

"Hardly! I've helped the police on a few cases."

"Gus says there was a killing at his Fourth of July party and you solved it."

"I made a few suggestions," Jonas admitted.

The girl who'd danced the part of Salome came running onto the stage, still in costume. There was applause all around as Mills introduced her. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you our star and my new client, Amber Knox!"

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She did a little twirl and headed for the buffet table. "She can't be more than seventeen," Jonas commented.

Nathan Mills snorted. "The real Salome was even younger!"

Gus came over to join them with a handsome middle-aged woman dressed in street clothes. "You don't recognize her out of costume but this is Elizabeth Moulin, Salome's mother in the play."

"You were very good, and quite wicked," Jonas told her.

"Thank you. I tried to be."

When the guests were all assembled Gus gave a brief welcoming speech about friends at Christmas time and introduced an appearance by Santa Claus himself. A well-padded individual appeared with a bag of small gifts which he began passing out to the guests. Jonas was surprised when he unwrapped his own and found a magnifying glass. "Just like Sherlock Holmes!" Gus called over to him.

Most of the other gifts were more impersonal—imported caviar, bottles of fine wine, fancy perfume. When it came time for Santa to unmask, Jonas fully expected it to be Gus's companion Mark, but he was fooled. It was a man closer to Gus's age, a stagehand named Dave DeMeter. He was a jovial Santa and carried on the part even after he'd removed his cap and beard.

Elizabeth Moulin had received one of the bottles of perfume from her costar, and she excused herself to put it safely in her dressing room. "Wouldn't want to drop it," she told Gus, giving him a peck on the cheek.

Jonas found himself in conversation with young Amber Knox at the buffet table. "Is this your first New York show?" he asked.

"It is! I starred in a production of *Annie* back in Des Moines, but I guess there are a lot of former Annies around. Being a Salome is something else again!"

"Were you a dancer before?"

"Not really. I had to take lessons—"

She was interrupted by a man in a bulky knit sweater who came running on stage. "Mr. Ryan, something's happened to Miss Moulin!"

"Happened? What do you mean, Benny?"

"She's hurt herself. She's bleeding. I heard a noise, sort of a muffled crack, and then she was calling for help."

Several of them followed him back to her dressing room, where the door stood open. Elizabeth Moulin lay on the floor, gasping

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for breath. Jonas saw the blood on the front of her dress and the small .22 automatic on the floor. That would have caused the muffled crack, not loud enough to be heard by the partygoers.

Jonas knelt beside her. "Can you hear me? Who shot you?"

She opened her eyes. "My ex-husband—"

"Your ex-husband shot you?"

She nodded. There was blood in her mouth. "He followed me in here. The gun—I was afraid of him and I took it out of my purse. He grabbed it and shot me."

"Who is he? Who's your ex-husband?"

But she was beyond talking then. The effort had brought a new surge of internal bleeding. Jonas rose to his feet. "Did someone call an ambulance?"

"On the way," Benny said.

Later, after the police and ambulance crew arrived, he had a chance to speak with Gus Ryan. "Who's Benny? A stagehand?"

"Benny O'Rourke, the stage doorman. He swears no one came in except the invited guests."

"He would have been closest to her dressing room, but not close enough to see anyone entering or leaving. What about this ex-husband? Who was she married to?"

Gus shook his head. "Beats me. I never knew much about her personal life, except that Elizabeth Moulin is a stage name. The first time I met her, ten years ago, she was Betty Dunne. I told her it was a fine name, but she wanted something classier."

Jonas smiled. "Elizabeth Moulin, as in 'Moulin Rouge.' "

They were all clustered on stage, standing in small groups, when one of the detectives came back with the news that she'd died on the way to the hospital. "She said her ex-husband shot her," Jonas volunteered.

"Who are you?"

"Only a retired actor, a friend of Gus's."

Gus Ryan snorted. "Never invite him to your parties. He's bad luck. He'll ring down the curtain on you!"

Nathan Mills, the agent, wondered if they could go. "I was just dropping by briefly," he said. "I have to stop at another Christmas party."

"Just wait till we've had a chance to interview everyone," the detective said.

Mills sighed and went back for another drink.

Jonas went over to the dressing-room area, where the police were questioning the doorman, Benny O'Rourke. He still in-

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sisted that the sound of the small-caliber shot had been so quiet he hadn't taken it for what it was. "Maybe it was suicide," he speculated.

"Not with that dying statement of hers. Who was her ex-husband?"

"Beats me."

Everyone else said the same. No one among the guests had known her well enough to identify the mysterious spouse. The detective sighed and turned his attention to the next in line for questioning, the stagehand, Dave DeMeter, who'd been Santa Claus.

Jonas was watching him, letting his mind wander, when he suddenly spoke up. "Moulin Rouge!"

Gus Ryan was closest to him. "What was that?"

"Betty Dunne took the stage name of Elizabeth Moulin. You've known her since then, so chances are this marriage would have been earlier. But there'd been recent trouble and she feared him so much she carried a gun."

"Does that tell us who it is?"

"It tells us it wasn't one of the cast or crew. Even if forced to work that close to her ex-husband, she never would have stayed for a party she knew he'd be at."

"But who was here that she didn't expect?"

"Perhaps young Salome's new agent."

"You mean—?"

"Most everyone in show business must know that Moulin Rouge is French for Red Mill. Elizabeth chose a variation of her married name for her stage name. Mills became Moulin. And the ex-husband who shot her is Nathan Mills, the agent."

Mills was slipping out one of the exits when they grabbed him.

Afterword

I had just finished reading proofs of these four stories for their publication in this little book when something happened which must be recorded in an afterword.

The two men who came to my door seemed familiar, but I couldn't quite place them until they identified themselves. "Detectives Sloan and Fitzpatrick, Mr. Maguire. May we come in?"

I stood aside for them. "The names are familiar—"

It was Sloan who did the talking. He was a tall, slender man with a clipped way of speaking, as if he was always in a hurry.

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Maybe he was. "We investigated the boating accident that killed your wife a year ago last spring."

"Yes, I remember you now."

"I came to tell you the case has been reopened."

I felt a jolt of surprise. I hadn't expected it to be quite like this. "Reopened? For what reason?"

"I'm a great admirer of your fiction, Mr. Maguire. Detective Fitzpatrick and I read all four of your new stories about Jonas Killdeer. You manage to crowd a great deal into a small space."

I was growing impatient. "Is there a point to all this?"

"Indeed there is, sir. We now have evidence that your wife's death was not accidental. We wish to question you regarding the murder of Diana Cerf Maguire, and I must warn you now that anything you say may be used against you. If you wish to have a lawyer present—"

"Yes, yes, I know the routine. I've written it enough times, for God's sake! Tell me why you reopened the case."

"I think you know the answer to that, Mr. Maguire. Either those four stories were a subtle challenge to the police or they were a subconscious cry for help."

"I don't know what you mean," I told him.

"The crimes all have something in common: a wife who kills her husband, a man who kills his lover, a husband who kills his wife, and a husband who kills an ex-wife. It does seem like a pattern, doesn't it?"

"A very common one in mystery fiction."

"The four killers in the stories are named Natalie Martin, Neil Maynard, Nunzio Macoris, and Nathan Mills. In each case, Mr. Norman Maguire, their initials are the same as yours."

"What have you got on me?" I asked coldly.

"A fingerprint that we overlooked before, a fingerprint that may show you tampered with the boat."

I tried to laugh. "It looks like I'll be needing Jonas Killdeer to get me off."

"He can't help you now," Sloan said. "Your wife's maiden name was Cerf, and Cerf is the French word for deer. Killdeer becomes Killcerf. Don't tell me you didn't know that, because you used a similar type of clue as the solution to your Christmas story."

As I write this I am awaiting sentencing for Diana's murder. When I think back on it, my only real regret is that Detective Sloan was nothing at all like Jonas Killdeer.●

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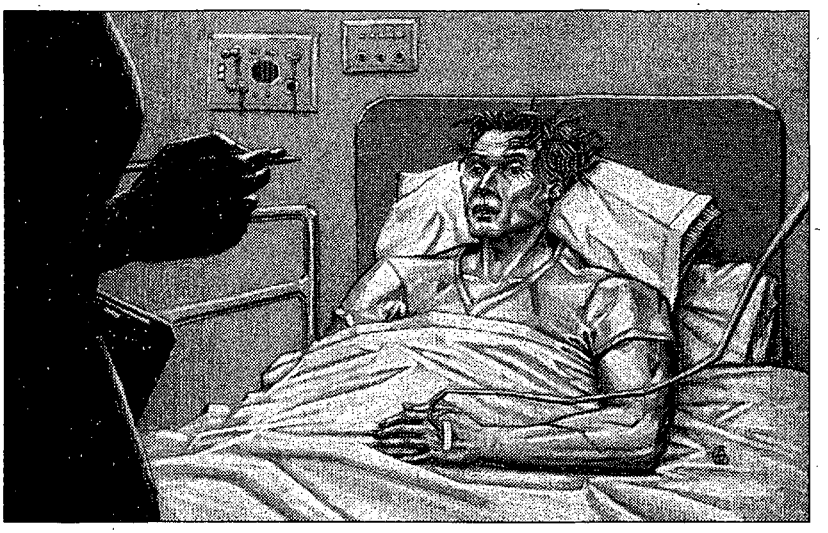

Art by Alan M. Clark

SOFT TARGET

by Clark Howard

Frank Grey walked across the vast parking lot that surrounded like an ocean the island in its middle that was the Los Angeles Convention Center. It was one of those warm, bright, clear days that Angelenos tell people they have year-round but don't. Frank had a camera bag slung over one shoulder, and a plastic photo-ID badge clipped to the lapel of his sport coat. He walked at a normal pace, taking thirty-inch steps as he had been taught in the Marine Corps years earlier; one hand was casually in a trouser pocket, the other holding the camera-case strap. There was an outwardly calm expression on his face, just as if he were not on his way to kill a man.

Across the front of the Convention Center was a huge banner that read: INTERNATIONAL CRUISE-LINES CONFERENCE; at a door just off the main entrance, a much smaller sign stated simply: PRESS ONLY. Frank fell into a straggly queue of media

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people being checked in by security guards as it filtered gradually into the cavernous building. As he shuffled slowly forward, the first pain of the day seized his duodenum. He tensed, clenching his jaw and neck muscles.

Not now, he thought. *Not here. Give me a break.*

From his coat pocket, Frank took a roll of antacid tablets, popped three of them into his mouth, and began chewing furiously. He managed to get them masticated enough to swallow just as he reached the security checkpoint.

"Cliff Martin, Trans-World Press," he said to the guard, pushing his lapel out to better show the ID badge. The guard compared the badge photo to Frank's face, made a check on his clipboard, and motioned Frank inside. As Frank entered, he felt sweat break out on his upper lip. The pain in his stomach slowly spread like spilled gravy on a kitchen counter. In the main foyer he found a drinking fountain, silently prayed that the water wouldn't be tepid as was so often the case, and quickly gulped several swallows; thankfully it was ice-cold. The instant chill of the water washed over the nerve ends of his duodenum, numbing the pain. Knowing from past experience that the relief would last only about five minutes, Frank chewed several more antacid tablets.

Outside the building, a long, white limousine pulled up and Frank watched through the bank of glass entrance doors as a man named Ari Orisis, a Greek cruise-line owner, emerged and held his hand for a beautiful woman companion to follow him. As they entered the foyer they generated an immediate surge of

Clark Howard's last *EQMM* story, "Split Decision" (12/94)—a hard-boiled tale of a boxer's dilemma—was a nominee for the 1994 Shamus Award for Best Short Story, given by the Private Eye Writers of America. The nomination is the latest in a long list of honors the author has won for his fiction. Clark Howard is equally gifted as a true-crime writer. His painstaking research for his nonfiction often takes him into prisons, and even to Death Row, experiences that give a realistic feel to both his fiction and nonfiction. †

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media clamor. Unzipping his bag, Frank removed a hand-held video camera and made his way into the throng of reporters and photographers as it completely encircled the dazzling couple: Ari Orisis, tanned, gray at the temples, Armani-clad, smiling with perfect teeth; his companion tall, stately, shapely, bejeweled, confidently aware of her status of the moment as mistress to one of the world's wealthiest men.

As Frank threaded his way through the crowd, he removed from another pocket of the camera bag an already-cocked Glock automatic handgun with a muzzle-muffler attached. He inched his way behind Ari Orisis, pretending to shoot video footage as he moved. His eyes swept the exits to select his primary and secondary escape routes. He was good at crowd kills, especially if it was a media crowd. Media people never looked for an assailant; all they cared about was the victim—especially if he was famous. On-the-spot footage of the last moments in the life of the famous Ari Orisis—

Another pain wrenched Frank's stomach, so severe that it caused him to moan slightly under his breath, a moan that fortunately was lost in the tumult, covered by the din and disorder of the working press. He forced himself to ignore the pain because he was almost close enough now, a few more feet to go. Frank wanted the muffled muzzle of the Glock up against the base of the Greek's spine when he squeezed the trigger; he wanted the toxin-coated, hollow-nosed bullet to explode in the Greek's kidneys, bladder, liver, wanted it to tear up and poison everything in its path—

When the pain came again, it was so intense that Frank's mouth went dry, a wave of warmth coursed through his body, and his legs lost their purpose entirely. *I'm going,* he thought. *I'm going under—*

He barely had time to get the Glock back into its zippered pocket in the camera bag before he fainted and pitched forward onto two reporters in front of him.

Nine hours passed before Frank awoke. He was between crisp white sheets, with an intravenous needle in the back of one hand, and a nurse standing next to the bed. She wore a name badge that read: CLAIRE COWELL, R.N. Frank tried to speak, feeling his lips pull apart from being stuck.

"Wh—where—"

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"Queen of Angels Hospital," the nurse said. "You've just been brought down from the recovery room. You had emergency surgery a few hours ago for a perforated ulcer."

Turning his head slightly on the pillow, Frank could see the room's door. He was not in a jail ward and there was no guard.

"I—had a—camera case—"

"It's in the bottom drawer of your nightstand. The admittance office has been trying to contact Trans-World Press, the name on your ID badge, but they haven't been able to locate them. You didn't have any other identification when you were brought in, just some keys."

"Wallet—must have fallen—out—"

"Maybe it will be turned in. You probably want someone notified."

"I'll—make a—call—" He reached for the bedside phone and the nurse put it on the bed beside him.

"Would you like me to dial for you?"

"No—"

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes—"

"I'll get you something for it."

When the nurse left, Frank pulled the phone closer and dialed a number. It rang three times before a soft male voice answered.

"Barry speaking."

"This is Frank—"

"Frank! Where the hell *are* you? The colonel is *furious!*"

"Hospital—Queen of Angels. I—passed out. Had emergency—surgery—"

"Where's your camera bag?" Barry asked tensely.

"It's—okay. Nobody tumbled—"

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure—"

"Hold on," Barry said. Frank could hear subdued voices and knew Barry was talking to the colonel. Then he came back on the line. "I'll be there to see you in the morning."

"Okay—"

Frank hung up as the nurse returned to his bedside with a hypodermic needle. "Codeine for the pain, Restoril to help you sleep," she said, injecting the solution directly into the intravenous line. After she put the needle aside, she wet a cloth at the sink and squeezed it out. Leaning over him, she gently wiped

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his face, eyes, and lips. As she worked, her right breast rested on his arm. Her face was close enough for him to feel her breath and detect the fragrance of some kind of body powder.

Frank closed his eyes, enjoying her closeness as the codeine went directly into his bloodstream, warming him.

Barry arrived as soon as visiting hours began the next morning. He walked in with a potted plant, saying without preliminary, "You wouldn't *believe* what the florist in the lobby charged for this weed." Barry was black as a licorice stick and just as whip-thin. Blatantly gay, even a little feminine, only his eyes warned anyone who saw such things that he was very dangerous. Those eyes were flat, cold, emotionless. They were eyes like Frank had: eyes of a killer.

From the pocket of his blazer, Barry handed Frank a copy of the morning *Times,* with a photo on the front page of Ari Orisis and his beautiful companion boarding the Greek's private jet to return to Athens. "The colonel thought you might like to see a two-million-dollar fee getting away," he said wryly.

"I couldn't help what happened," Frank replied resentfully.

"The colonel knows that, luv." Barry lowered his voice. "Otherwise I'd be here to kill you, wouldn't I?"

"The colonel wouldn't do that to me," Frank said confidently, shaking his head. "We've been through too much together."

"Please, no Vietnam war stories." Barry rolled his eyes in boredom. "I know you were brothers in arms and all that macho shit. But business *is* business, Frankie, and we *did* lose a cool two million. Now where's the camera bag?"

Frank bobbed his chin at the night stand and Barry retrieved the camera bag, slinging it on his own shoulder.

"Get well soon, luv," he said as he left. "We'll be in touch."

When Barry was gone, Frank stared up at the ceiling, remembering his words. *Otherwise I'd be here to kill you, wouldn't I?* Would the colonel really kill him if he made a mistake, he wondered. If he somehow blew an assignment? Was he being let off this time only because it was something he couldn't prevent? Was a perforated ulcer all that was keeping him alive?

Closing his eyes, Frank thought back to when he had first known the colonel, back in a filthy Viet Cong prison camp, a lifetime ago. . . .

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Every day they were let out of their cages in the ground and made to walk in a circle around the compound yard. They were all sick, dirty, desperate, clinging to life. Only two of them had any flint left in their eyes: a handsome Marine reserve colonel from Chicago, and a barely brown, part Northern Cheyenne Marine sergeant from the Lame Deer reservation in Montana. The sergeant's name was Frank Grey Wolf.

One day as they shuffled around in their somber, tedious exercise, Frank heard the colonel whisper behind him. "Hey, Grey Wolf. You and I are escaping tonight. Be ready an hour after sunset."

That was all he said. Frank had not been involved in any planning, knew of no escape plot, had no notice. Just: "You and I are escaping tonight."

Later in the day, Frank asked, "Why me, Colonel?"

"I need somebody to kill a sentry for me," the colonel had told him simply. "Otherwise I'd go out alone."

So that night Frank waited. An hour after sunset his cage hatch was opened and the rope ladder dropped. As Frank climbed out, the colonel handed him a knife and led him in darkness to the camp's south fence. There they cut the throats of two sentries patrolling together and tunneled under the razor wire. Then they made a run for it. Searchlights came on, sweeping the clearing around the camp like something eerie and alien. Automatic-weapon fire began, sounding like cheap firecrackers lit a package at a time. Something that felt like a red-hot poker went through Frank's left shoulder and he pitched to the ground. Rolling on his back, he thought: That's all she wrote for me, man. The colonel's going to be long gone—

But the colonel came back and dragged Frank with him. They made it into the jungle, where the guards, who were mostly ignorant ex-farmers, would not follow at night because they were afraid of snakes.

It took the colonel six days to make it back to the American lines, and he dragged the wounded Frank every step of the way with him. . . .

Early that evening, Frank woke up to find nurse Claire Cowell in his room again. As she was making an entry on his chart, he studied her. She was barely attractive, more plain than pretty, and seemed to have a hint of hardness in her expression, yet she

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had a presence or an odd magnetism or *something* that caused Frank's eyes to follow her. Maybe, he thought, it was only because he wanted her help; he wanted to use her.

"Do you ever do special favors for patients?" he asked quietly.

"Not since AIDS was discovered," Claire Cowell replied drily.

"That's not what I meant," Frank said. "I've got a cat at home. I need someone to go by and feed it for me."

"Call a relative," she suggested. "Or a neighbor."

"I don't have any relatives in Los Angeles. And I can't call a neighbor because it's an illegal cat. Pets aren't allowed in the building."

"I'm sorry, you'll have to find somebody else," she said. "Really, I don't think the hospital would approve."

"The hospital doesn't have to know. I don't have anybody else to help me."

"You must be close to somebody—"

"I'm not. I'm not close to anyone."

"Well, I'm sorry, I can't."

"My cat will starve," he said, making it sound like an accusation.

"No. That's final. I'm sorry." She walked out of the room. Then, within seconds, walked back in. "All right. But you have to keep quiet about it. My shift ends at midnight; I'll stop by then."

Frank wrote down his address for her and gave her his keys from the nightstand drawer.

"Look, there's one other thing," he said, keeping his voice as casual as possible. "The name on the mailbox isn't Cliff Martin, it's Frank Grey. Don't worry about it."

"Wait a minute, I think you'd better find somebody else," Claire said, suddenly suspicious. She tried to hand his keys back but he wouldn't take them.

"No, really, it's okay," he assured her. "My name is Frank Grey. I was just using Cliff Martin's ID to try and get some video I could sell. It's okay. I promise."

Claire raised one eyebrow dubiously. "I don't know. I have a feeling I'm going to regret this little act of kindness."

"Never," Frank guaranteed. "Word of honor." Their eyes met and held. "I promise," he said, voice softening into genuine sincerity. "You won't be sorry you helped me."

Uncertainty in her expression, Claire Cowell left Frank's room, still holding the keys he had given her.

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* * *

One week later, Frank got out of a taxi in front of his apartment building in Westwood. Opening his apartment door, he found Claire there, putting groceries away. His cat, like himself a mixed breed without pedigree, hurried over to rub against his leg.

"You really aren't close to anyone, are you?" Claire said, more a statement than a question. "You don't get mail, there aren't any messages on your answering machine, no one inquires about your absence. You're not some kind of spy, are you?"

"No, not a spy," Frank said, smiling slightly. He sat down in his living room and Claire came to join him. The cat got up in his lap.

"I know you make a good living," she said. "There's not a bottle of wine in your pantry that costs under fifty dollars."

"I work for a liquidating firm," Frank told her. "We help settle outstanding debts, transfer business ownerships, things like that. It's commission work, very lucrative."

"But why so reclusive?" she wanted to know. He shrugged.

"I guess I'm just not comfortable being sociable. I grew up on an Indian reservation. I'm a breed, part Cheyenne."

"Some of the other nurses and I were wondering about your skin color. It's very handsome; kind of tawny, almost burnished. The consensus was that you were Peruvian or some other exotic nationality."

Frank shook his head. "Just plain Indian." Rising, he went to his desk and got a checkbook. "I want to pay you for all your help—"

Claire shook her head. "Just pay me for the groceries; the receipt's on the counter."

"I really would like to pay you for your time—"

"Take me to dinner then," Claire said impulsively. "Not now; I mean when you're stronger. Or would that make you uncomfortable—being sociable?"

"I don't think I'd be uncomfortable with you," he said, remembering the touch of her breast on his arm.

"Good," she declared. "Dinner it is, then."

She had a sudden urge to wet her lips, as if in anticipation, but for some reason would not allow herself to do it.

* * *

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When Frank went to see the doctor for his post-op examination, the news was not reassuring. "As you know," the doctor said, "when I opened you up in surgery, I found most of your stomach to be ulcerated. You were very fortunate that only one of the ulcers perforated, instead of several. It might have been fatal. You have the stomach lining of a man twice your age." He paused a beat, then asked, "Did you grow up on a reservation?"

"Yes."

"Do you know whether your mother drank heavily when she was pregnant with you?"

"My mother was an alcoholic, yes," Frank replied quietly. The doctor nodded.

"I thought so. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is unusually common among Native American women. A woman drinks while she's carrying her baby and the alcohol has detrimental effects on the unborn child. It can go after the mind of the fetus, the eyesight, major organs, anything. It went after your stomach lining. Your mother—"

"Forget my mother, Doctor," Frank said evenly. "What she did, she did. Get to the bottom line on my condition."

The doctor pursed his lips briefly, then said, "All right. I can prescribe high doses of a drug called Tagamet for you. It will do as much for your condition as any medicine can. I can also modify your diet to conform with your condition. But medication and diet alone is not the answer. You must also eliminate the mental stress and emotional pressures in your life, whatever they are, that have caused and are continuing to irritate the ulcers. Otherwise, you will be subject to future perforations of the kind you recently experienced. If that happens, depending on the circumstances, one of them could be fatal."

Frank shook his head wryly. Of all he had been through in his life, all the times he might have been killed and hadn't, it was his dead mother's whiskey bottle that was reaching from the past to try and get him.

Barry answered the door that evening at the colonel's palatial Bel Air mansion.

"Luv, you look terrible!" he said. "So pale." He winked intimately at Frank. "You need some color in your cheeks."

Frank was sent to wait in the colonel's richly paneled library, filled to the ceiling on two walls by shelves of books on military

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history dating back to what was known about skirmishes among the Neanderthals. Ignoring the books, Frank went over to a large oil painting he had seen many times before but could never resist. It was a portrait of the colonel, looking very distinguished in Marine Corps dress blues, silver eagles of his rank on the epaulets, five rows of decorations overlapping on his chest.

As Frank stared at the imposing portrait, he thought about a day at the U.S. Marine barracks in San Diego, years earlier. . . .

His left arm still in a sling, Frank Grey Wolf walked out of the discharge center with a large manila envelope in his hand. As he did, a shiny new Coupe de Ville pulled up in front of him and its passenger door opened. Behind the wheel, in sport shirt and slacks, was the colonel.

"Welcome back to the world, kid," he said with a smile. "Get in. I'll buy you your first civilian lunch."

Driving up Pacific Coast Highway along the ocean toward Los Angeles, the two veterans did a little reminiscing for a few miles, and then the colonel said, "I've never mentioned what I did before 'Nam, have I?"

"No, sir." It seemed natural to Frank to still address him as "sir." The colonel did not object; he believed in his own superiority.

"I was in charge of the American section of an international cartel that deals in accelerating inheritances," the colonel told him casually. "If a person is due to come into a sizeable estate, and the person leaving that estate is, well—lingering, let's say—our firm would step in and find a way to speed up the process."

"Are you talking about killing people?" Frank asked, surprised.

"Yes, but it's not like random murder or anything like that. Some of the parties to be accelerated are terminal cases already." The colonel smiled. "I recall one old man whose heart was so bad, all we had to do was frighten him to death. One of our operatives slipped into his bedroom one night, turned on his bedside lamp, and when he woke up held a large snake in his face. The snake was perfectly harmless, but of course the old man didn't know that. Heart failed on the spot."

"Why are you telling me this, Colonel?" Frank asked. He already suspected the answer.

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"You were a scout-sniper in 'Nam. What was your body count?"

"Nineteen confirmed."

"And actual?"

Frank shrugged. "Thirty, maybe."

"Were you comfortable killing?"

Frank turned his head and looked inland, away from the colonel and the ocean. He *had* been comfortable killing; he just didn't know how to admit it.

"I want you to work for me, Frank," the colonel said. "I'm taking over the American operation again and I need someone accomplished for long-range sniper work, as well as an occasional close-contact job."

"Sir, are you serious? You want me to kill people for a living?"

"Maybe you have better prospects," the colonel said. "Back on the reservation. Like working in some white man's car wash in town. Earning minimum wage."

"I don't know what I'm going to do, sir," Frank said flatly, "but I'm not going to become a hired killer."

Now it was the colonel who shrugged. "It's your choice, of course." He paused a beat, then added, "But I do expect you to do one job for me. The one you owe me for dragging you through that jungle for six days." The colonel's voice took on the slightest of edges. "You will pay me back for that one, won't you, Frank . . . ?"

"Hello, Frank." The colonel had come into the library where Frank was staring at the portrait. "Thinking about the good old days, I'll bet," the colonel said. "I do that myself sometimes. Peace is a son of a bitch for men like us, isn't it?"

They sat down and Barry joined them.

"You certainly gave us a scare with that emergency operation and everything," the colonel said. "Didn't you realize you had an ulcer?"

Frank shook his head. "I thought it was just bad indigestion. The doctor says my whole stomach is full of ulcers. He says I have to avoid stress, worry, tension, things like that."

"Really?" The colonel's eyebrows went up and he glanced at Barry.

"Colonel, I want to talk to you about quitting," Frank said. It was something he had rehearsed all morning. "I've worked for you for a long time. I've done twenty-seven contracts for you—"

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"And I've taken very good care of you for your services," the colonel interjected.

"Yes, sir, I know that—"

"You also know that people don't just quit the cartel. An enterprise like ours can't have ex-employees running around all over the place."

"Yes, sir, I understand that. Look, Colonel, I'm not *telling* you that I'm quitting. I don't want to end up *being* a contract. I'm asking for permission. It's for the cartel's good as well as mine. My ulcer could have perforated a minute *after* I pulled the trigger instead of a minute before."

Silence claimed the room. The colonel stared thoughtfully at Frank, drumming his fingertips soundlessly on the arm of his chair. Nothing was more serious to him than vulnerability.

"You have a valid point," the colonel said finally. "However, it's not my decision alone, you know. I'll have to obtain higher authority." He rose, indicating that the meeting was over. "But I'll try, Frank. For you, I'll try. After all, we did go through a lot together, and as you pointed out, you have served me well and loyally over the years. So I'll try."

As Barry showed Frank out, he shook his head cynically. "I can't believe you sometimes, Frank. You're so naive. Do you really think they'll let you go?"

"Yes, I do. I trust the colonel."

"Trust is for fools and lovers," Barry declared. "I'll probably have to kill you myself." He squeezed the muscle of Frank's arm. "What a waste."

At dinner with Claire a few nights later, she told Frank a few things about herself.

"The first time I got married, I was all of eighteen and thought I was very mature, very sophisticated. I didn't marry a man, I married an adolescent like myself. Difference was, I grew up; he never did. At nineteen I got the first of two abortions. At twenty I got smart. At twenty-one I got a divorce and got out. Want to hear more?"

"I want to hear it all," Frank said.

"Okay. I worked nights as a waitress to pay my way through nursing school. Along the way I climbed into bed with half a dozen men I thought might be right for me. None of them were; at least, I apparently wasn't right for them, because when they

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got tired of screwing me, they moved on." She raised one eyebrow inquisitively. "More?"

"Everything," Frank told her again.

"Well, I made it through nursing school and got my R.N. I was doing pretty well as a nurse. I started going with a med student who was working his way through school like I had done. We seemed to have a lot in common, including mutual lust. We must have had sex in every broom closet, storage pantry, and unoccupied bed in the hospital. We even did it in surgery once between an appendectomy and an inguinal hernia repair."

Claire took a sip of wine and studied Frank. He had eyes like bullet holes and never seemed to blink. When she looked at his lips or his hands, it made her feel moist.

"When the classes and the studying and the job got to be too much for him, he was going to quit med school and look for a different career. Instead, I suggested that we get married and he let me put him through the rest of school. He jumped at the chance. We settled down in a little apartment near the hospital and everything was peachy for his last two years of school and his one-year internship. Then he came home one day, packed his things, and moved out. He got a Mexican divorce and married the daughter of an eminent proctologist who took him into his Beverly Hills practice. I was left high and dry—again."

"You should have found a slick alimony lawyer and sued the bastard," Frank said.

"That's not my style," Claire told him. "I'm not the vindictive type. All I think when it happens is that it's good riddance and there's one more prick out of my life." Her expression became grave. "Normally I take things like this very slowly. It was a total surprise to me when I asked you to take me to dinner. I couldn't believe I did it."

"You realize there's something building between us, don't you?" Frank asked. "You must feel it the same as me."

"Yes. I do feel it. And I think we'll do something about it." She looked away. "I just don't think that it'll last. I don't *want* to think that it'll last."

"The sooner we start doing something about it, the sooner we'll know whether it will last," Frank suggested pointedly.

Claire bit her lower lip briefly. "You still have sutures, don't you?"

"Yes."

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"When are they scheduled to come out?"

"Day after tomorrow."

She gave it a moment's thought, then said, "All right. But you'll have to let me do all the work."

Frank smiled a rare full smile. "I think I can adjust to that. For now, anyway."

Claire drew a finger down his cheek. "I'll just bet you can."

Frank did not take her arm as they left the restaurant. The next time he touched her, he wanted her to be stripped naked.

Two weeks later, Frank was summoned to the colonel's home. The colonel was having lunch on the patio, being served by Barry.

"Good news, Frank," the colonel said. "Because of my personal endorsement of you, the board has agreed to let you retire. I made myself responsible for your future conduct; I hope you understand the import of that."

"I do, yes, sir," Frank assured him. "I appreciate this, sir. I won't let you down, I promise."

"You never have, Frank," the colonel complimented him. "And I know you won't on one last contract I have for you. It's an emergency job, came in quite unexpectedly. The window of opportunity is only two days. But it's a soft target, a very easy job. The contract involves quite a large private trust, and the client insists it be done in a certain way; no shooting or anything like that. The method the client finally agreed on was a hit-and-run. You'll use a heavy panel truck. The whole thing will look quite legitimate."

Frank was taken aback. "I, uh—I didn't expect to have to take on another job, Colonel," he said awkwardly. "And this truck business—well, that's kind of out of my line."

"Out of your line?" The colonel frowned. "I don't see how, Frank. It's a job of killing. That's what you do."

"I've never killed anyone with a truck—"

Barry, standing off to the side, had an expression on his face that oozed in amusement at Frank's discomfort. "Look at it as an adventure, Frankie," he interjected. "Something you've never tried before." He winked when Frank glanced at him.

"Using a truck shouldn't pose a problem for you," the colonel said. "It isn't as if you'll have to back over the target two or three times. The party to be hit is already in poor health; ill

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practically since birth, according to the client. We've been told that it won't take more than a good bump to nail the lid on, so to speak."

"Even so," Frank argued, "having to do it within two days is impossible. I'll never be able to set it up in time—"

"Frank, please stop talking to me as if I am some kind of fool," the colonel said, voice now becoming cold. "The hit has been set up *for* you. It can be done at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon, or three o'clock the day after tomorrow. The target lives directly across the street from a park, and every afternoon at about three o'clock crosses the street to sit in the sun and read for an hour. The time is generally the same every day, the street is crossed at the same corner, the target sits on the first bench inside the park. The routine never changes, except when it rains."

"And before you ask," Barry added, "I've checked with the weather bureau and there are nothing but blue skies predicted for the entire week."

Frank sat back in his chair, sighing quietly. He had no choice—and he knew it. His stomach knew it too, as it began to churn and roil. At a nod from the colonel, Barry handed Frank a neatly typed card containing the name "Gene Dayton" and an address on Wellworth Avenue in Westwood.

"You can pick up the truck at the Oceanfront Garage in Santa Monica," Barry said. "It's cold, so you can abandon it anywhere after the job's done."

Frank put the card in his pocket. "Okay, Colonel, I'll take care of it," he said.

"I knew I could count on you, Frank," the colonel said, smiling.

But the smile, Frank knew, was not sincere. He had not pleased the colonel today.

Strolling the Venice boardwalk with Claire after dinner that evening, Frank said, "I'm thinking about moving to Alabama."

"Alabama?" Claire gave him an "Are you crazy?" look.

"The Gulf Coast of Alabama," he explained, "between Florida and Mississippi. It's the fastest developing oceanfront area in the country. I've got quite a bit of capital saved; I've been thinking of buying a little income-producing business of some kind and putting down roots."

"What kind of business?"

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"I'm not sure. Small motel, maybe. I've done some checking into that. I'd build a nice place right on the beach, maybe twenty units; hire some local help for my maid crew; make a deal with a commercial laundry for linen supplies; find an accountant to keep the books and work the front desk myself. With the excess capital I'd still have, all I'd have to do is break even." He stopped and faced her. "It'd be easy to run; I'd have lots of free time to spend with you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you." Frank took her by the shoulders. "Go with me, Claire. Let's make a life for ourselves together."

Claire shook her head. "Permanent relationships don't work for me, Frank."

"This one will. We'll make it work."

Claire pulled away and began walking again. Frank fell in beside her.

"We're good together, Claire, you know we are."

"I know. I know that. It's just that you're *rushing* so."

"Sometimes you have to rush to stay ahead," he said, thinking about what he had to do the next day.

"Stay ahead of what?" she wanted to know.

"Everything." Frank shrugged. "Life, fate, circumstances."

"Love?"

"No, not love. We have to let love catch up."

They stopped again and Frank drew her into a darkened doorway where they kissed and pressed their bodies close.

"God, Frank," she whispered, "if it didn't work with you, I think I'd die."

"You won't die," he promised. "I won't let you down the way the others did."

They remained in the darkened doorway for a long time, hands moving almost desperately over each other.

At ten till three the next day, Frank was behind the wheel of a white panel truck parked on Wellworth Avenue across from Westwood Memorial Park. The truck had BEL AIR PARCEL lettered on its side. Frank wore a brown UPS-type delivery uniform. He watched the front door of an older, rather stately looking single-family home set among newer, upscale duplexes. From time to time he glanced at a clock on the dashboard. The hands moved to three; five past three; three-ten. Frank became

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increasingly nervous; sweating, he felt the familiar spreading pain in his stomach. Opening a bottle of Maalox, he took a long swallow and used his sleeve to wipe the milky residue from his lips.

Finally, at three-fifteen, a woman of perhaps thirty, carrying a book, emerged from the house. She wore a leg brace but managed very well with it, as if she had used it a long time. Moving down the sidewalk, she reminded Frank of a lame old Crow woman who had lived on the Montana reservation. As a rule, the Cheyenne of his community would have nothing to do with their neighbors the Crows; they considered them inferior. But the Cheyenne were also benevolent and compassionate, so they had taken this lame old Crow woman in and let her live in their community. She would go from shanty to shanty, dragging one leg behind her. Wherever she was at mealtime, she would be fed; wherever she was at night, a bed would be found for her. All the Cheyenne children were taught to show her deference because she was a Weak One.

As Frank watched, the woman with the leg brace went to the corner and crossed into the park. At the first bench inside the park, she sat down and opened her book.

Frank frowned deeply. This couldn't be. Or could it? No one else had come out of the house.

Getting out of the truck, Frank crossed to where the woman sat. "Excuse me, ma'am," he said politely, "but didn't I see you come out of that house across the street?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?" She smiled pleasantly.

"I wonder if you can help me? I had a parcel for someone on this block yesterday, but part of the address got torn off. It was for a fellow named Gene Dayton—"

"That's my name," the woman said.

"I think this was a man. Gene with a G."

"I'm Jean with a J," she said. "It must have been for me. My cousin Ellen and I are the only two Daytons on the block, I believe."

A cold dread came over Frank. This handicapped woman was his soft target.

"I, uh—maybe I can redeliver the parcel tomorrow," he said.

"If you can't, that's all right," Jean Dayton said. "It's probably a going-away gift of some kind; I'm leaving for Ireland the day after tomorrow. My cousin Ellen can always forward it to me,

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whatever it is." She smiled. "I might not be allowed to keep it anyway."

"Why not?" Frank asked, frowning.

"I've been accepted into a convent of handicapped nuns who run an orphanage in Dublin for handicapped children from around the world. To belong to the order, one must take a vow of poverty; all worldly goods must be given to charity prior to entering."

The pieces fell together for Frank. The colonel had mentioned a large private trust. Obviously somebody wanted Jean Dayton disposed of before she could donate that trust to charity.

Seeing the concerned look on Frank's face, the woman said, "Please don't worry if you can't redeliver the package in time. I'm sure it won't matter."

"Thank you, ma'am," Frank said. "It's nice of you to understand." As he started to leave, he paused. "Uh, good luck in, uh—you know, what you're doing."

"Why, thank you," Jean Dayton said, genuinely pleased. "Thank you very much."

Frank hurried away then, back to the truck.

At the colonel's mansion two hours later, Frank told the colonel and Barry what had happened. It was a repeat of the story he had telephoned them mere minutes after determining that Jean Dayton was his target. Now, after going over the story again, Frank was on the edge of anger. "I should have been told that the target was a woman," he said, his words an accusation.

"You *would* have been told, Frank—if we had known," the colonel replied coolly. "This contract came from another area. All the particulars were passed on by a third party, except the name and address of the target; that information was telephoned to Barry."

Frank locked eyes with Barry. "What the hell made you assume it was a *man?*"

Barry shrugged. "It was a natural mistake, luv."

"That's a joke," Frank said. "There's nothing *natural* about you."

Barry smiled coldly. "Yes, there is, Frank. I have a natural talent for killing people—just like you do. I'd advise you not to forget that."

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"That's enough," the colonel said impatiently. "I agree with Barry; it was a natural mistake. After you called us, Frank, we did some further checking. The target *is,* as you say, a woman. Our client is the fiancé of the target's cousin. He wants the target removed before she can dispose of her holdings in order to join some religious group that thinks poverty is spiritually divine or something." The colonel glanced at Barry, who was staring levelly at Frank. "The cousin to whom our client is engaged will inherit if the target is removed *before* she disposes of her holdings. Fortunately, Frank, you still have one day to complete the assignment—"

"I can't complete it!" Frank snapped emphatically. "The target has seen me, seen the truck. I *talked* to her for five minutes. A dozen people could have noticed us. Some of those same people might see the hit-and-run tomorrow. You don't seem to understand, Colonel—"

"It's *you* who doesn't seem to understand, Frank!" the colonel cut him off, slamming a fist down on his desktop. "This assignment *will* be carried out!" Rising, he glared at Frank. "Unless, of course, you want me to conclude that you have become such an unreliable person that you are no longer an acceptable candidate for retirement. Is that what you want me to think, Frank?"

"No, sir, you know I don't want that," Frank replied, feeling helpless. "But I don't want to take any unnecessary chances, either—"

"I think our Frankie has lost his balls, Colonel," Barry said coldly.

"Keep quiet, Barry," the colonel ordered. "This is not negotiable, Frank. You either show me that you're still reliable or you don't. It's your call."

Shaking his head, Frank felt a weariness, a frustration, a dejection, that reminded him of the way some of the old men looked after a lifetime on the reservation, when there was no hope at all of things getting any better. So it was with this situation. There simply was no *good* way out of it.

In the end, Frank acquiesced.

He had no choice.

When he left the colonel's house, Frank drove to Queen of Angels where he knew Claire was on her night shift. All the way there,

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the colonel's words reverberated in his mind: *". . . no longer an acceptable candidate for retirement."*

The meaning couldn't have been clearer.

At the hospital, Frank called up to Claire's station and asked her to meet him in the cafeteria where they could talk.

"I've got to leave town tomorrow night," he told her. "I've been given a very large estate liquidation job in New Orleans. The commission will be very good." He took her hands across the table and tried not to sound too urgent. "I know it's short notice, but I want you to come with me. On weekends we can drive over to the Alabama coast and look for our motel site."

Claire shook her head. "Frank, I can't. I—I can't move this fast. And I've been having second thoughts—"

"Second thoughts? About what?"

"About this, about *us*. I'm just not sure, Frank."

"You were sure before, when you agreed that we'd try. Nothing's changed, Claire. We're just doing it sooner than we planned."

"Frank, I can't take another failure in my life," she said tightly. "I can't stand to have one more relationship end up like some limb with gangrene that has to be cut off. I can't keep on *losing*, Frank!"

"You aren't going to," he promised, keeping his voice quiet, calm. Across the cafeteria table, he squeezed both her hands and ignored the pain that had begun racking his stomach back at the colonel's house. "We can do this. Try, Claire. Please try. I won't let you down like the others did."

Claire marshaled enough strength, finally, to force aside her reservations. "All right. All right, I'll try. One more time, I'll try."

"Good." Frank pressed on before she could think further about it. "Now listen, I'll have a plane ticket sent over to you in the morning. Meet me at the airport tomorrow night. Don't try to bring a lot of stuff, and don't worry about your apartment; we'll come back in a few weeks and take care of everything." He put a hand on her cheek. "Will you be there? At the airport?"

"I'll be there, Frank."

But when they parted in the hospital lobby, there was still doubt in Claire's eyes.

When Frank got back to his apartment, there was a message on his machine from Barry.

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"Listen, luv, I'm sorry about our little spat today, but you did get unnecessarily bitchy with me. I just wanted to warn you not to mess up tomorrow. I know the colonel a lot better than you do, despite that macho war thing between you. You blow the Dayton assignment and you're a dead man. A word to the wise, dear. 'Bye, now."

Listening to the message, Frank had begun to sweat again, and his stomach went deeper into its roiling mode. He got his Tagamet and took a double dose. To relax, he lay down on the couch. His cat immediately jumped up to join him. Frank stroked the cat's throat.

"Wish I had nine lives like you," he said grimly to himself.

The next afternoon, Frank was once again in the panel truck, in place on Wellworth Avenue, nervously chewing antacid tablets on top of the Maalox he had already drunk. His eyes were riveted on Jean Dayton's front door.

Exactly at three, she came out and walked slowly with her braced leg down toward the corner. When she was almost there, Frank started the engine. Jean Dayton stepped off the curb into the street. Good leg, lame leg, good leg, lame leg—

Frank shifted into low gear, and moved the truck slowly forward.

Jean Dayton reached the middle of the street—good leg, lame leg—

Frank shifted to second, flattened the accelerator, and sped straight for the woman.

Jean Dayton heard the sound of the truck, glanced up, for a fleeting second appeared to think it would slow down, then suddenly knew it would not. Freezing in fear, she dropped her book and threw the back of one hand to her mouth. She looked Frank directly in the face.

Their eyes locked between blinks: the killer and his soft target.

And suddenly Frank saw not Jean Dayton but the lame old Crow woman he remembered from his boyhood. That lame old Crow woman, not Jean Dayton, was staring at Frank from the middle of the street.

Frank stomped down on the brake and cut the wheels away from her. The truck lurched sideways, tires screeching, rubber being laid to pavement. On a pivot it went, on two wheels, almost

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turning over. Then it skidded to a dead stop, forty feet past Jean Dayton, the engine stalling.

Sucking in a panicked breath, Frank saw in the rearview mirror a couple of people running out to the lame woman's aid. Seizing control of himself, he started the truck, backed it up, straightened it in the street, and drove away.

Back in his apartment, Frank got out a small getaway suitcase and started packing. He threw into it a number of thick sheaves of currency, three passports, his Glock automatic with the muzzle-muffler, three extra magazines of ammunition. As he turned for something else, the closet door opened and Barry stepped out, leveling a silencer-equipped revolver at Frank.

"I warned you, didn't I?" Barry said quietly. "You're such a hardhead; you never listen. The colonel had me watching downstairs when you left today; I was in your apartment ten minutes later. And he had someone watching the Dayton woman's house. As soon as you blew it, that person called the colonel, and the colonel called me." Barry moved toward him. "You have such nice skin, Frank; it's like polished copper. We could have been real friends, you and I."

"Maybe we still can," Frank suggested.

"Naturally you'd say that." Barry cocked the revolver's hammer, moving still closer.

"Let me prove it to you, Barry," Frank said. He licked his lips suggestively.

"Too late, baby," Barry told him dolefully. Still coming, he aimed the gun at Frank's chest.

Suddenly there was a blood-chilling screech as Barry stepped on the cat's tail. Barry jumped sideways. "Jesus Christ—!"

When he looked back, Frank had the Glock snatched from the suitcase and leveled.

"Too late for you, baby," Frank said.

One muffled *thoom!* and an ugly red hole replaced Barry's nose.

It was a grim, determined Frank Grey who walked up to Jean Dayton's house and rang the bell. The door was answered by a glossily handsome but somewhat preoccupied man. "Yes?" he said.

"My name is Smith," Frank said. "I live a few doors down. I

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just wanted to inquire how Miss Dayton was after her awful experience today."

"Oh. Well, she's pretty shaken up. She's upstairs in bed; her cousin is sitting with her."

"That would be her cousin Ellen?"

"Yes. I'll tell Jean you came by, Mr.—ah, Smith, you said?"

"Yes. You must be Ellen's fiancé."

"Yes, I am. Roger Graham—"

"Roger, did you know there's a broken railing at the end of the porch there?"

"A broken railing?" Graham peered out the door.

"Could be dangerous," Frank said. "Let me show you where it is—"

Graham came onto the porch and followed Frank. At the end of the porch, Frank turned, the Glock out and leveled.

Thoom!

Frank dropped Roger Graham over the porch rail. Walking back to the front door, he quietly closed it and left.

The colonel, in a red brocaded Chinese robe, was sitting up in bed, looking through a photograph album, when Frank silently walked in, holding the Glock at his side. Looking up, the colonel grunted softly.

"I can't say I'm surprised, Frank. I should have done you myself. You killed Barry, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll miss him." The colonel sighed. "He mixed a damned good martini. You want his job?"

"No."

The colonel's eyebrows went up. "Want mine?"

"All I want is my life, Colonel."

"Too late for that, Frank. You gave me your life a long time ago." From one of the album sleeves, the colonel pulled out a photograph and tossed it to the foot of the bed. "Remember this, Frank? The Dien Chau Country Club."

Curious, Frank stepped over and looked down at a photo of the colonel, himself, and four others, all in rags, part of the circle of men walking in the P.O.W. compound.

"And this one?" The colonel flipped several pages and tossed another photo down. "That's after we escaped, Frank—"

Frank looked at a photo of himself and the colonel, both of

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them gaunt and ragged, him wounded, being treated by navy corpsmen at an aid station.

"Oh, here's one you'll love—"

The colonel flipped to another page to reveal a cutout in the album's remaining pages, a cutout that held a small automatic. Snatching it out, he fired.

As the slug hit him in the side, Frank raised the Glock and squeezed off five quick *thooms*.

The colonel was momentarily pinned to the bed's headboard by the impact; then he slumped over dead.

At Los Angeles International Airport, Frank checked his small bag at the counter, rode the escalator upstairs, and walked slowly through the security check. He moved almost like a zombie down the long concourse. At some point he reached under his coat, then looked at his fingers. They were bloody.

At the crowded gate, Claire was waiting. The plane for New Orleans was already boarding. Seeing him, Claire's worried look quickly became a smile and she hurried to meet him.

"It's so late," she said nervously. "I was afraid you weren't coming—"

"I promised—I wouldn't let you—down," Frank said with a tight smile. He looked at his bloody hand again. "But I think—I have—"

Frank dropped to his knees and Claire bent quickly to catch him. His coat opened and she saw blood soaking his shirt.

"Oh my God—!" Hugging Frank to her, Claire looked around in panic. "Somebody please help me—!"

An airport security guard hurried toward them as Frank Grey Wolf died. ●

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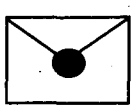

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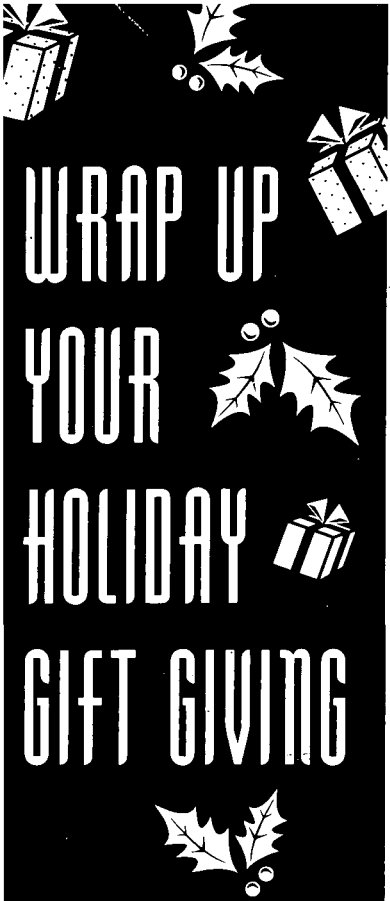

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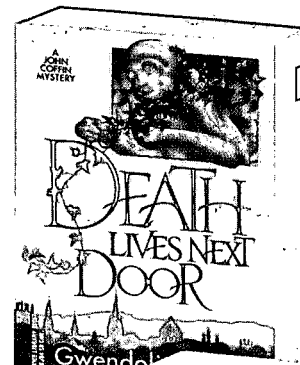

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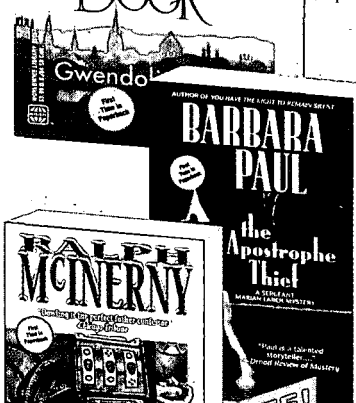

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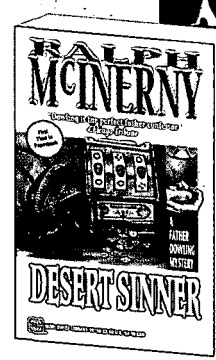

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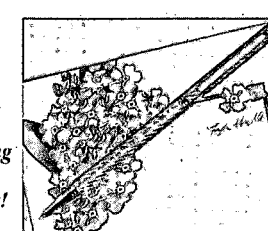

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